

BEYOND HIS MEANS

Also by Sewell Stokes

COURT CIRCULAR

RARELY PURE

WITHOUT VEILS

*(The Biography of
Gladys Cooper)*

RECITAL IN PARIS

BEYOND HIS MEANS

*a novel, based on the life
of Oscar Wilde*

By

SEWELL STOKES



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FOR
JOHN MORRIS
the traveller from Tokyo

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Certain information regarding his friendship with Wilde was given me by the late Lord Alfred Douglas at the time when, in collaboration with my brother, I wrote the play, *Oscar Wilde*.

Chapter One

A LITTLE cock-sparrow of a man sat alone at a table just inside the ground-floor room of the Café Royal; fighting an obviously losing battle with his patience. His whole appearance was a challenge. The flashing eyes, prominent nose, and fiercely curled moustache had about them a distinctly hostile air—as if their very definite purpose was instantly to send about his business anyone of whom jointly, or separately, they disapproved. His clothes proclaimed him to be a man of substance, if a little lacking in taste. No fault could be found with his dark, well-tailored suit, but the satin tie he wore was of an unfortunate shade of blue, stabbed with a pin whose jewelled head was large enough to seem a trifle vulgar.

When not looking up at the customers as they arrived, the little man made a pretence of scanning an evening paper, turning over the sheets so peremptorily with one hand that it was a wonder they didn't tear in half: while with the fingers of the other hand he beat a tattoo on the marble-topped table that grew louder as the minutes passed and the friend for whom he waited failed to appear. The impression he must have made upon anyone who took the trouble to watch him closely—which none did in that crowded room, occupied as they were in chattering, drinking, laughing, and in some instances flirting even—was of a man holding himself in, but ready to burst into flame if the moment he counted on was much longer postponed.

Even an expert in detection must have failed to discover from his appearance to which of the professions he belonged, or indeed in what capacity he earned a living. But there could be no doubt that whatever his undertakings, they succeeded, for the gloss of prosperity coated him as smoothly as if it

had been carefully applied to his person with a brush. Any one, however, chancing to recognise Frank Harris by sight—which was possible, for he was not without renown of a sort—would have evinced a far greater interest in the identity of his expected guest, than in the man himself. For Harris was known to waste precious little time upon nonentities; nor was the occasion of any meeting at which he was present likely to be other than momentous, according to his own reckoning.

Indeed, as a journalist and editor—he preferred to be known as a man of letters—Harris possessed qualities of a quite exceptional nature. His genius for picking up the scent made him a literary bloodhound of the first order, who managed always to be in at the kill; his pen ready to acclaim the hunter, or demand justice for the hunted, according to how his sympathies were engaged. And what was also remarkable about him was the mysterious power he had of persuading persons of the very greatest eminence to confide in him their most carefully guarded secrets. By sheer luck—some called it sheer invention—he happened to turn up in the guise of a Boswell at the precise moment in their careers when the eminent ones felt a pressing need for confession, and for himself as their confessor. Had he lived in their day it is inconceivable that he would not have been at Marie Antoinette's side to catch her last words before the basket caught her head; or stood on the shore at St. Helena to greet Napoleon upon his arrival.

It had been said of him, by the friend he now waited for: "Frank is asked to all the best houses—*once*"; but had the remark been repeated to him he would not have taken offence, for his hide was of the toughest, and his good opinion of himself unshakable.

A favourite story, which his friends had no need to repeat amongst themselves because he repeated it, in all seriousness, so frequently himself, concerned King Edward VII; whose personal regard for him he declared upon one occasion to have been a source of embarrassment. At a supper-party

the slightly inebriated monarch was alleged to have risen from his seat, walked the length of the room, and put his arm round his neck; a gesture for which Harris, with due respect, had seen fit to rebuke him—on the grounds that it must not only shock the Court, but also cause his unworthy subject to become a target for envy and hatred.

When presently Oscar Wilde entered the room, several heads were turned in his direction, and conversation interrupted to call attention to his presence. In his vast overcoat with its astrakhan collar he looked no more conspicuous than any other man of fashion; what chiefly distinguished him in appearance was his height, the thickness and length of his hair, and, above all, the blazing intelligence of his fine eyes. He carried his hat and gloves in one hand and a gold-headed malacca cane in the other. Noticing Harris at once, he went and sat down at his table, smiling apologetically.

"I'm late, Frank. You must forgive me."

"You got my note?"

"I would hardly be here otherwise." He frowned good-humouredly as his eyes met those of his friend: "Must you look so dreadfully serious?" he said. "Or has something upset you? I do hope not. But if it has, of course you must tell me all about it."

"What I have to say concerns you, Oscar. But it can wait. You're dining with me at my club. We'll have a drink first, and then be on our way." He caught the waiter's eye, gave him an order, and as the man departed, said: "I'm glad you were free this evening, Oscar."

"I made myself free. You said in your note that you had something of the utmost importance to tell me."

"I was not exaggerating." But Harris changed his tone, determined for the moment to put weightier matters aside. "They tell me, Oscar, you are contemplating a trip to Algiers? I wish I could come with you. But I am pretty busy, you know. The attraction of Algiers is quite irresistible. In all my travels, and I suppose I have travelled as widely as anybody . . ."

Crestfallen, Wilde said:

"Am I to understand, Frank, that you have really asked me here only to deliver a lecture on the flora and fauna of North Africa? Because in that case . . ."

"My dear fellow," said Harris, his eyes sparkling, "I only wanted to tell you about a damsel I came across last year in Tunis. She couldn't have been more than fourteen, and as plump as a little partridge . . ."

Wilde, his face impassive, and twisting slowly the scarab ring he wore, listened patiently to the unfolding of a story whose object he had guessed from the start was to present Harris in his famous rôle as the Casanova of modern times. Not least among the man's numerous accomplishments, if one could credit half he said, was the magnetic attraction he had for women of every age, shape, and nationality. A glance from him, and they were his amorous slaves, fastened leech-like to his manly bosom until such time as he flung them aside and went in search of fresh conquests. Apparently no female with whom he had ever had anything to do, when the moment of farewell arrived could resist telling him that alone of her lovers he would be remembered; a confession which, on the evidence of Harris's somewhat unprepossessing physique, inclined his listeners to suspect him of exercising some form of mesmerism between the sheets. The naïveté of his boasts, however, their resemblance to a schoolboy's affectation of superiority, saved them from becoming utterly intolerable to listen to. As part of his buccaneerish, but not entirely unlovable, personality, they were accepted more or less without complaint, if with a large grain of salt.

"I was not mistaken, Frank," said Wilde, when eventually the colourful narration was brought to a close. "It is a lecture I have been summoned to hear. I am not at all sure that I did a wise thing in cancelling another engagement that I had for this evening."

Harris remained unperturbed by the other's remark, which indeed he had no need to take very seriously. They were after all friends of long standing, their association dat-

ing back to the occasion, some years previously, when a Park Lane hostess had introduced them to one another in her drawing-room. Of this lion-huntress Wilde had later said: "She has tried, poor thing, to found a *salon*, but only succeeded in opening a saloon"; a witticism that Harris had modestly admitted he could scarcely have bettered himself.

It was a lecture—in all seriousness—that before the evening came to an end Harris delivered, as the two of them sat over dinner at his club. A self-confirmed authority on French wines, he ordered a red bordeaux, which he facetiously likened to a lawful wife in its everyday excellence, thereafter elaborating his theme by comparing champagne to the change a man felt in need of when he purchased himself the favours of a courtesan. In vain Wilde pleaded a preference for the courtesan. His host, however, remained obdurate; excusing what might seem a fault in his hospitality by urging the necessity of a clear head to take in the words of wisdom he was about to impart.

"Is it really about myself that you wish to speak to me, Frank?"

"It is. And what I have to say is for your own good. I think you should know that the most scandalous things are being said against you all over London."

No more than a flicker of apprehension passed across Wilde's face. Then he said, smiling:

"I don't wish to hear about them, Frank. I love scandals about other people, but scandals about myself don't interest me. They haven't the charm of novelty."

"But surely you don't want people to talk of you as something vile and degraded? I'm well aware that you have the security of your position, your wealth, all that kind of thing. But in these matters position and wealth aren't everything." Harris paused, looking his friend directly in the eye: "Mind you, Oscar, I don't for one second believe a word of these rumours. I treat them for what they are—malicious lies, manufactured by those who are jealous of you."

"Thank you, Frank. And what do you suggest I do?"

"For one thing, you can be more careful in your behaviour. Avoid giving these enemies of yours a chance to gossip."

"And how would you have me do that?"

"You can be more careful of the company you keep; and, if I may say so, less extravagant in the theories you are always propounding."

"Theories? What theories?"

"Oh, your theories about life; your theories about pleasure. All your theories, in fact."

"Pleasure is the only thing worth having a theory about."

"As you very well know, I'm not a prude, but when . . ."

Harris left the sentence unfinished. He realised he was getting nowhere with this childishly irresponsible friend of his, who as likely as not would presently tell him—not in so many words, and with a charming smile—that it was foolish to meddle in affairs that were no concern of his. All the same, he meant to stick to his guns; to do what he could to knock some common sense into a head so stuffed with pleasant illusions about life that its owner failed to appreciate the dangerously false position into which he was allowing himself to drift.

Watching the blue smoke curling away from the tip of his cigarette, Wilde said, airily :

"My dear Frank, believe me, no civilised man ever regrets a pleasure, and no uncivilised man ever knows what a pleasure is. One must be in complete harmony with one's self. One's own life is the important thing."

"If one lives one's own life, one may have to pay a terrible price for doing so."

Harris had spoken with intense feeling, but Wilde refused to take him seriously.

"Yes," he said, "we are over-charged for everything nowadays. I should fancy that the real tragedy of the poor is that they can afford nothing but self-denial. Beautiful sins, like beautiful pleasures, are the privilege of the rich."

Exasperated by this attitude, Harris, turning impatiently in his chair, said:

"You don't believe half the things you say, Oscar; you know you don't. At heart you aren't at all the sort of person you make yourself out to be. Don't imagine that I *like* playing the governess! My dear man, if I wasn't convinced of the danger you're running yourself into by behaving and talking as recklessly as you insist upon doing, nothing on earth would induce me to broach the subject. Do give me the credit for knowing what I'm talking about."

Should he do that? Wilde asked himself. He lit a fresh cigarette, although the one he had been smoking was only half finished, and considered the question, at the same time gazing steadily at his friend's flushed face. Out of loyalty, he thought, this dynamic little man, so far removed from me in temperament, yet a sincere admirer and champion of my work, is taking the trouble to warn me. In all probability the warning is totally unnecessary. Exaggeration is a habit naturally acquired by journalists, whose very livelihood depends largely upon their aptitude for dramatising trifles. But perhaps that is not altogether a reason for dismissing his good intentions as entirely worthless. In any case it seems a little inconsiderate.

"Frank," he said, "I really am grateful to you. I am sure your advice is well meant. But I am certain, too, that there is no need to worry. May we leave it at that?"

Harris leant forward across the table as if he thought the gesture might add weight to his words, each one of which he pronounced with the utmost solemnity.

"Oscar, I don't think you quite realise what *is* being said about you."

The moment, not unforeseen by Wilde, had arrived when he felt it incumbent upon him to pursue one of two courses: either he faced the facts that his friend, without actually stating them, had endeavoured to bring home to him—or he kept up the pretence of being only vaguely aware of what these insinuations amounted to.

"I realise, of course," he said, "how people chatter in England. The middle-classes air their moral prejudices over their gross dinner-tables, and whisper about what they call the profligacies of their betters, in order to try and pretend that they are in smart society, and on intimate terms with the people they slander. In this country it is enough for a man to have distinction and brains, for every common tongue to wag against him. You forget that we are in the native land of the hypocrite."

"On the contrary," said Harris, "that is just what I am remembering."

His tenacity, apparently, was not to be discouraged. After turning him from the subject for a while with gossip about the rehearsals of his new play at the St. James's, Wilde found himself reproached once more for not paying sufficient attention to what had been told him for his own good.

"I see, Frank," he said "that you will not be happy until you have repeated whatever it is that people are saying about me. Well, I am prepared to listen to you."

"You mean that, Oscar?"

"Certainly. Though I am quite indifferent to the world's opinion. Let it think what it likes of me."

Harris considered for some seconds how to put into words the unpleasant thing he had to say. Then he came out with it.

"I heard something the other day about a curious letter sent to Beerbohm Tree, anonymously. It concerned you, Oscar. I should add that I had my information on the best authority."

Wilde felt relieved. It was less than he had expected.

"So the news has reached you," he said. "All London seems to have read my private correspondence."

"I didn't say I had read the letter. I was merely given to understand that what you wrote in it was far from discreet."

"I will tell you, Frank, precisely what happened. A copy of a letter I wrote to a friend of mine was sent anonymously

to Tree, who showed it to me, saying he thought it dangerous. I laughed at the idea. A little later a man came to me with some more of my letters, written to this same friend, which he said had accidentally fallen into his hands. I gave the man some money for them—he looked wretched and I felt sorry for him—but I noticed afterwards that the original of the letter sent to Tree was not amongst them.”

Harris interrupted him eagerly :

“Does it occur to you, Oscar, that some blackmailer may be waiting his opportunity to sell the original?”

“He has already sold it,” said Wilde, calmly. “Or rather he gave it to me of his own accord, for the price of a trifling tip. It is now safely in my possession. Does that satisfy you?”

“I’d rather you told me that you had destroyed the letter.”

“But why should I destroy it? It is a beautifully written letter. One day it may be worth a fortune to somebody who collects original manuscripts of mine.”

For the first time that evening Harris spoke as if he doubted a little his own sagacity.

“You say the letter is harmless?”

“Perfectly harmless. In fact it is really a prose poem. If you care to come along to my chambers with me I will show it to you. Then you may judge for yourself.”

Had Wilde stopped to ask himself why, since the matter seemed now at an end, he had invited Harris back to his rooms, he could not easily have found the answer. Although his reason could have been the urge he had (yet was scarcely conscious of) to confide in someone fears that at present no more than vaguely disturbed him. He could for this purpose have consulted a number of his friends with whom he was on more intimate terms than he was with Harris. But these would have been of not much use to him, for it was less sympathy he needed, than the unprejudiced outlook of someone who, being unfamiliar with certain aspects of his private life, could be trusted to take an objective view of the tedious situation in which he had let himself become involved.

. The rooms to which the two men made their way through

the gas-lit streets were close by. They represented but one of the many refuges, as he called them, that Wilde was in the habit of taking furnished for brief periods in the hope of finding privacy in which to work undisturbed. His permanent residence, where he lived with his wife and two small sons, was in Tite Street, Chelsea. Indeed he entertained there frequently. But on one pretext or another he contrived to spend a good deal of time away from his family, renting houses up the river, or in the country: and even engaging rooms at various hotels in the West End.

From the drawer of a desk, after he had poured out drinks, he took a bundle of letters tied with ribbon; selecting from it one which he held out to Harris.

"This is the one that all the fuss has been about," he said. "You will notice what a filthy condition it is in. I pointed out to the man when he returned it to me that I thought it quite unpardonable better care had not been taken of my original manuscript. His excuse was that it had passed through so many hands!"

With the expression on his mobile face of one whose opinion is solicited on a matter of the gravest importance, Harris read the letter carefully through. It was apparent that the contents somewhat alarmed him.

"May I ask," he said, looking up with narrowed eyes, "to whom this letter is addressed?"

"To Bosie."

"Bosie?" He shook his head, intimating that he was none the wiser.

"Lord Alfred Douglas," Wilde told him, pronouncing the name distinctly enough to arouse the faint suspicion that he considered it to be not unimpressive. "You knew he was my friend, surely?"

"Yes, yes, I did. I've seen you about together." Harris glanced at the letter again. Momentarily at a loss for words, he took a long drink; the effect of which, seemingly, was to loosen his tongue. He struck the accusing note of a cross-examination:

"Do you happen to be acquainted with young Douglas's father?" he asked.

"With Queensberry? Oh dear, yes. He's a very tiresome person, I'm afraid."

"A dangerous man, Oscar. Has he read this letter of yours to his son?"

"Not to my knowledge. But then these days it's so hard to tell who has, and who has not, read my letters. The one you are holding appears to have enjoyed a fairly wide circulation."

Standing up, Harris began pacing the room, his hands clasped behind his back. He looked like a fierce little bull-terrier. Wilde watched him with some amusement.

Coming suddenly to a standstill, Harris said :

"I must be honest with you, Oscar. I know you wouldn't want me to be anything else. In my opinion Tree is absolutely right. A very curious construction could be put on the words you've used in that letter." He waved his hands expansively: "'Madness of kisses! . . . Those crimson lips of yours! . . .' Are you surprised that such extravagant language has led people to think the worst?"

Wilde corrected him gently:

"Red *rose-leaf* lips. I see, Frank, that the subtleties of my poem are quite wasted upon you."

"Oscar, this is no laughing matter. You have to face the fact that if Queensberry, who is *not* a poet, should learn of the contents of this letter, he is more than likely to start an attack. I'm told he's an exceedingly hot-tempered man who stops at nothing to achieve his own ends. I wouldn't put it past him to go out of his way to make trouble for you."

"He has already made trouble," said Wilde, taking up, with an air of resignation, another letter from the table. He crossed the room and stood in a relaxed attitude with his back against the mantelpiece. Holding the letter a little away from him in one hand, and tapping his cigarette in the other, he said : "Listen to this, Frank. It was written by his father to Bosie :

“‘Alfred. It is extremely painful to me to have to write to you in the strain I must; but understand that I strongly disapprove of your intimacy with this man Wilde. It must either cease or I will disown you and stop all money supplies. I am not going to try to analyse this intimacy, and I make no charge; but to my mind to pose as a thing is as bad as to be it. No wonder people are talking as they are. If I catch you again with that man I will make a public scandal in a way you little dream of; it is already a suppressed one. I prefer an open one, and at any rate I shall not be blamed for allowing such a state of things to go on. Unless this acquaintance ceases at once, I shall carry out my threat. Your disgusted so-called father—Queensberry.’”

Harris asked if Douglas had replied to the letter.

“He sent his father a brief telegram,” said Wilde. “In it he said simply: ‘What a funny little man you are’.”

Harris frowned.

“Unwise, I should say.”

Wilde, taking the discussion more seriously, agreed with him:

“Bosie,” he said, “is impetuous, you know. Not that he hasn’t good cause to hate his father. The man is a menace to his entire family. I can’t tell you what all of them, especially his poor wife, have had to put up with in the past. They are divorced now, of course. The only excuse one can make for him, is that he is utterly mad.”

“Madmen are always dangerous. Has it occurred to you, Oscar, that it might not be a bad thing to arrange a meeting with Queensberry, to have the whole thing out with him? It might have the effect of clearing the air, of convincing him that he is mistaken in these absurd suspicions of his.”

“I had thought of that. But if you knew the man as I do, you would realise the uselessness of any such interview. He is obstinate beyond all belief. It is not his son’s welfare he is concerned with. That is the least part of it. What is at the back of these threats, this fiendish delight he takes in persecuting me, is an insane hatred that he has always had for

poor Bosie. Really he is a monster without any human feeling whatever."

"You know him, then?" said Harris.

"We have met once or twice. On the last occasion he called at Tite Street, and behaved in a quite unforgivable manner. So insulting was he, that we almost came to blows."

Having gone thus far in allowing Harris to share his confidence, Wilde saw no harm in acquainting him with a few facts relating to Queensberry's attempts to break up his friendship with Bosie. In the mouth of any other man this recital must have sounded like a tale of woe. But with the light touch which seldom deserted him, even in moments of serious intention, Wilde now succeeded in revealing his unhappy situation as if he considered that it belonged to the realm of pure comedy. Particularly was Harris made aware of this when, after discoursing at some length upon the uneasy relationship existing between himself and the SCREAMING SCARLET MARQUESS, as he called him, Wilde came to speak of that enraged gentleman's visit to his house.

Accompanied by a prize-fighter (he himself had compiled the rules of boxing that bore his name) Queensberry had pushed his way past the footman, and come upon his enemy standing on his own hearth-rug in the library, languidly smoking the inevitable cigarette.

"Sit down," he had shouted; to which Wilde replied calmly that he allowed no one to talk to him like that in his house, or anywhere else.

"I suppose," he said, "you have come to apologise for the statement you made about me in letters you wrote to your son? I should have the right any day I chose to prosecute you for writing such a letter."

"The letter was privileged, as it was written to my son."

"How dare you say such things about your son and me."

"You were both kicked out of the Savoy Hotel at a moment's notice for your disgusting conduct."

"That is a lie."

"You have taken furnished rooms for him in Piccadilly."

"Somebody has been telling you an absurd set of lies about your son and me. I have not done anything of the kind."

"I hear you were thoroughly well blackmailed for a disgusting letter you wrote to my son."

"The letter was a beautiful letter, and I never write except for publication. Lord Queensberry, do you seriously accuse your son and me of improper conduct?"

"I do not say you are it, but you look it, and you pose as it, which is just as bad. If I catch you and my son together again in any public restaurant I will thrash you."

"I do not know what the Queensberry rules are, but the Oscar Wilde rule is to shoot at sight."

Wilde had then told Queensberry to leave his house instantly, and upon the other refusing to do so, threatened to have him put out by the police.

"It is a disgusting scandal," said the Marquess.

"If it be so, you are the author of the scandal, and no one else," replied Wilde; who had gone then into the hall and pointed him out to the footman, saying: "This is the Marquess of Queensberry, the most infamous brute in London. You are never to allow him to enter my house again."

The uninvited guest, quite taken aback by the unexpected reception he had met with, hurriedly departed; his pugilist supporter following meekly in his wake.

If in recalling this episode Wilde had sought to make light of it (smiling at his own threat to use a revolver, and laughing outright when he mentioned how petrified with fear, on being asked to show the two men the door, his seventeen-years-old footman had looked) the effort had failed so far as his listener was concerned.

To Harris's way of thinking the scandal had reached proportions far beyond what he had envisaged on starting out that evening to warn his friend of the vague rumours he had heard. He now saw, rather too plainly for his liking, that the rumours had their foundation in some unmistakably ugly facts. His mission, therefore, became a more urgent one

than he had at first supposed it to be; one demanding more than a little tact. But tact had never been Harris's strong point. He believed in taking the bull firmly by the horns, regardless of consequences.

"Well, Frank, have you nothing to say?" asked Wilde, who though he would gladly have changed the subject, felt anxious, now that he had spoken so freely, to learn the other's opinion. Before, Harris had chattered incessantly, refusing to be turned from his objective. Now all he seemed able to do was to frown at the patch of carpet between his legs as if he were afraid to raise his head. Even when he did look up, meeting Wilde's steady gaze, he said nothing. But his silence proved merely to be the prelude to a question which, when suddenly he came out with it, rather took Wilde by surprise.

"Tell me, Oscar, is there an atom of truth in these rumours that are floating about the town? You may think that it is none of my business. But I feel that as a friend, who is more than anxious to defend your good name in public whenever he hears it abused, I have a right to know."

The decision Wilde had to make rested upon his willingness to break, for once, a rule to which hitherto he had strictly adhered. To save others, quite as much as himself, from embarrassment—for at all times he considered the feelings of others, in no matter what connection—he was careful to keep his friends in, so to speak, moral-tight compartments. True, he had of late been seen occasionally dining at smart restaurants with a lad whose appearance and mannerisms suggested his close affinity with the stable. But this was for him an unusual thing to do; an act rather of thoughtlessness, than of bravado—as the gossips chose to explain it.

By his hesitation alone, he convinced Harris that he would have preferred not to answer the question. But Harris felt none the less justified in having asked it. And valuing the man as he did, both as an artist and as a friend, he hoped that he was not going to be deceived by him.

Then Wilde said, his eyes, like his words, pleading for acceptance :

“Some things in my life, Frank, nobody understands but myself. Even Bosie does not share all my secrets.”

About to go, Harris held out his hand :

“If at any time you need my help, Oscar, you have only to ask. But I *beg* of you to be more careful.”

“That is generous of you, Frank.” Wilde clasped the other’s hand in his own. “It is always good to know who are one’s real friends,” he said.

Chapter Two

ISOLATED from the surrounding darkness by the light that fell directly from a shaded lamp, Wilde lay back in an arm-chair, his long legs stretched out towards the flickering fire. His bulk was swathed in a brocade dressing-gown of fantastic design, and on his feet were a pair of purple Moorish slippers, embroidered in gold. In this domestic attire he more than justified a criticism sometimes passed upon his appearance generally: that he looked not well-dressed, but dressed-up.

After Harris's departure he had begun to make notes of what he intended to tell the actors at rehearsal next day. But a copy of the play had slipped from his lap to the floor at the same moment that sleep overtook him. It had been a tiring day, and left as he was, with his mouth hanging open, and his stomach gently rising and falling to the sound of his snores, he might well have enjoyed the peace of oblivion until the early hours of the morning.

Had the spectre of death appeared at his side—a situation unlikely to have surprised the author of numerous fairy-tales through which mythical figures wandered at their leisure—and suggested sparing him the future with a stroke of his scythe, there is no knowing with what sparkling epigram he would not have turned down the offer. Even had the visitor been willing to afford him a glimpse of what lay ahead, he would instantly have rejected it, for the excitement of not knowing what fate had in store for him, he found irresistibly fascinating.

To a sympathetic counsellor (Harris was by no means the only one) he had said recently, when asked if he knew the risks he ran: "It is best never to know. My friends are extraordinary. They are always begging me to be careful.

But that would be a backward step. I must go on as far as possible." And inclining his head, he had added under his breath: "I cannot go much farther. Something is bound to happen."

At the time his counsellor had not known what to make of this confession. It had seemed to him an inexplicable, and, in his friend's case particularly, a hazardous attitude to adopt. And he had only after thinking it over for some days come to the conclusion that perhaps with certain natures the perpetual fear of discovery added in some strange way to the thrill of their clandestine pursuits.

The apparition into whose face Wilde presently found himself blinking, was vibrantly alive: a creature of classical beauty, but with the darting restlessness of a dragon-fly. It shed its own light in whatever direction it moved, and moved in all directions at once. Of the babel of words that poured from its lips little sense could be made by the sleeper they had so rudely awakened. Ceaselessly the voice rambled on, uttering confused sentences that seemed scarcely to be related, its owner pausing only for a second now and again to throw back a lock of fair hair that had tumbled into its eyes.

"What is the matter?" Wilde asked, raising his own voice almost to a shout in the hope of stemming the torrent. "Please calm yourself, Bosie. How can you expect me to understand a word of what you say if you shout and rant like a madman?"

The effect of his words was to silence Lord Alfred Douglas, who for a few seconds stood glaring furiously at his interrupter. Then flinging his evening cloak over the back of a chair, he marched across the room and helped himself to a drink.

A long silence followed. He had thrown himself into a chair, seized a newspaper, and hidden behind it. Wilde knew from past experience that now, having taken offence, as he invariably did when anyone spoke to him sharply, nothing but fulsome cajolery would persuade him to open

his mouth. And he was resolved not to give in to this childish display of petulance. But wanting to get to bed, if possible without being dragged into an unnerving scene, at last he said :

“Well, I am listening. Perhaps you will be good enough to tell me what it is that you have to say to me. But I must ask you to be as brief as possible, Bosie. You can see how tired I am, and I have to be at the theatre early in the morning.”

He might have been speaking to the air for all the response he got. Douglas turned the pages of the paper with deliberate casualness, focusing his attention upon them as if he found their contents entirely absorbing.

The heavy sigh Wilde gave out expressed the exasperation he felt, but managed always to control. If one of them had not kept his temper, the rows that so frequently occurred would have been too hideous to contemplate, he thought. As it was they filled him with disgust, and anger against himself for his inability to put an end, once and for all, to such worthless and degrading outbursts. He had done his best. More than once during the four years of this uneasy friendship they had separated, as a result of behaviour on Douglas's part that had seemed, at the time, to make any resumption of it an impossibility. But always in the end—and it was for this he blamed himself—he had weakly surrendered his will to that of the younger man's; forgiving him as he never should have done; aware as he did so of his own idiotic folly.

Once, in sheer desperation, he had flown abroad to escape from the mental strain that he felt was becoming too much for him; making some absurd excuse to his family, and leaving with his servant a false address in case he was followed by the next train. He remembered thinking, on the way to Paris, how lamentable it was that a man of his eminence should be fleeing from England in order to avoid, not a creature of the underworld with whom he had become entangled, but a young man of his own social standing; a frequent guest at his house. And he had made a vow with

himself that this time he would not relent. How then had he come, after withstanding for a few days the stream of telegrams and letters reaching his hotel, each of them filled with impassioned declarations of remorse, and pathetic pleas to be taken back, eventually to break that vow?

This question—no new one for him—he asked himself now, as helplessly he watched his tormentor from the opposite corner of the room. It was not even, he thought, as if Bosie any longer held a physical attraction for him. In the presence of his extraordinary beauty he felt as asexual as any normal man would have done in the presence of the Venus de Milo. It had struck him before that could Queensberry have known the truth of his association with his son, how far removed it was in fact from what he imagined it to be, he might well have found some other cause to engage his venomous attention.

“Bosie,” he said, gathering up his papers, and the large box of cigarettes he was never without, preparatory to retiring for the night, “perhaps you will be good enough to close the door quietly when you leave. I should like, if possible, to get some sleep.”

From behind the newspaper, without moving, Douglas said, in a peevish tone :

“This is the thanks I get for protecting your interests. Well, don’t blame me if your new play meets with complete disaster on the opening night.”

As they had been meant to, the words caught, and held, Wilde’s attention. He pretended not to notice them. But to afford Douglas an opportunity of saying more, instead of immediately leaving the room he busied himself with some papers on the bureau.

Douglas, pleased with the success of his strategy, and determined to prolong the suspense he had created, at once changed the subject. In an almost friendly voice he said :

“I was at Alfred Taylor’s this evening. You should have been there, Oscar. It was too amusing.”

“I’m sure it was.”

"Alfred played the piano. And Sidney Mavor dressed himself up as an Eastern slave-girl. He danced round and round the room, blowing everyone kisses."

"Was anyone else there we know?"

"Only Charlie Parker; reeking, as usual, of the stables. For once there were some new faces. A ravishing sailor with carrot hair behaved outrageously. And a rough, with gazelle's eyes, got terribly drunk. He tore poor Sidney's costume to shreds. Sidney was absolutely furious and screamed the place down. There was very nearly an ugly brawl."

Wilde looked up from his papers.

"If I were to say that I think you spend more time than is good for you at Alfred's rooms, no doubt I should be accused of preaching." He shrugged his shoulders. "So long as you enjoyed yourself, Bosie, I suppose that is all that matters."

"As if," said Douglas scornfully, "you never went to Alfred's place yourself. Really, Oscar, you are sometimes too absurd for words." He added, no longer able to keep his secret: "It's lucky I happened to be there. Quite by chance a boxer I met, who'd no idea who I was, talked to me about *you*."

"He said something nice, I hope?"

With scowling seriousness, Douglas repeated what the boxer had said. It appeared that friends of his had been approached through an agent of Queensberry's with a view to their creating a disturbance on the first night at the St. James's Theatre. After Queensberry himself had interrupted the play from the stalls, his hirelings were to support him by cheering loudly.

"We don't have to guess," said Douglas, "what my father intends to say."

"No, indeed," said Wilde.

The news upset him. He was not afraid, but angered. Why should his beautiful and brilliantly successful life be overshadowed in this way? This persecution by a lunatic had at first been an irritation to him. Now it had become a

serious nuisance. Recently the screaming Scarlet Marquess had been rushing to managers and head-waiters warning them that if he caught his son and 'that man Wilde' together on their premises, he would thrash them both. And as if to goad him further, Bosie insisted upon lunching and dining at these very restaurants, taking care first to inform his father of the date and place, and inviting him to come along and see what would happen if he dared to make good his threats. The situation was intolerable. At the same time no easy solution presented itself, that Wilde could see.

"What is one to do?" he said, sitting down heavily in a chair, and lighting a fresh cigarette.

Infuriated by this limp attitude, Douglas launched into a spirited argument, the burden of which was that since his friend made no serious effort to put a stop to it, he was largely responsible for the present disgraceful state of affairs. It was an argument he returned to constantly, and one by which he allowed himself to be carried so far beyond the bounds of reason, that listening to his shrill voice, and watching the light of hatred in his eyes, it was impossible not to see him as the victim of a bad inheritance; one as unbalanced in temperament as the father whom he had so much reason to detest.

"How much longer," he cried, "do you intend to let my father spread his filthy lies about us all over the town? If you'd prosecuted him a year ago, as I begged you to do, he wouldn't be at large now. By showing how weak you were, you have only encouraged him to continue his infamous behaviour."

For the moment Wilde said nothing. Partly, the accusation was true. Yet recalling the circumstances, he refused to accept the entire blame for not having instituted legal proceedings against his enemy. Others had come forward whose advice at the time had seemed not unsound. Among them Bosie's own cousin, George Wyndham. Not unnaturally he had been anxious to avoid a family scandal. And then Mr. Charles Humphreys himself, the experienced

criminal lawyer they had consulted, agreed that a compromise might better serve their interests.

"You are at least entitled to an apology," he had said. "I shall write and demand one." But for all the use his demand had been he might as well have saved himself the trouble.

"I certainly shall not tender to Mr. Oscar Wilde any apology for letters I have written to my son," Queensberry had replied. And thereafter he had intensified his private war to the extent of driving the object of his obsession to seek refuge in the country. Which perhaps, Wilde now reflected, had not been altogether a bad thing, since in the peaceful seclusion of Worthing he had managed to write his amusing play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Reminded of the play, and warmed by the thought of what an unqualified success—both financial and artistic—it was certain to be before a month had passed, he dismissed from his mind the dark vision of a lunatic molesting him. This sudden change of mood was the result of a firm belief in his own invincibility that he abandoned only when reluctantly forced by others to do so, or when his brain suffered from overtiredness. Such lapses from his accustomed gaiety, infrequent as they were, he always regarded afterwards as something of which to be heartily ashamed. 'A lord of language and a king of life', was how an admirer had once described him; and living up to this image of himself, which delighted him, he considered to be no less than his duty.

"Bosie," he exclaimed, rising from the chair, a grin enlivening his heavy features, "I utterly refuse to hear another word on the sordid topic of your unattractive parent. We will deal with him later, I promise you. But now you shall hear, my dear, what the readers of the *St. James's Gazette* will be devouring in a day or so: a few phrases I gave to Robbie Ross in an interview he is doing for that paper. I had to give it in order to protect myself, just in case the critics, when they see *Earnest*, feel compelled to speak

favourably of me and of my work. That would never do, of course. One thrives on unpopularity."

By the implacable expression on his young face, Douglas made it clear that he was quite uninterested. It would not have been surprising had he put his fingers in his ears as the other commenced to read. Wilde read for effect, enjoying immensely each phrase as it came from his lips :

"What sort of play are we to expect?"

"It is exquisitely trivial, a delicate bubble of fancy, and it has its philosophy."

"Its philosophy?"

"That we should treat all the trivial things of life seriously, and all the serious things of life with sincere and studied triviality."

Douglas interrupted him :

"I suppose that is how you choose to regard my father's unforgivable conduct," he said. "As a triviality."

Wilde looked at him calmly:

"If only you could bring yourself to do the same, Bosie, instead of going out of your way to inflame his hatred, I'm sure it would save us a great deal of unpleasantness. His unwelcome interest in you is unlikely to cease so long as you send him abusive letters and postcards, which only make things worse."

It was useless, Douglas now saw, to argue. The moment for that was passed. In his suddenly elated mood Oscar would not listen to his pleadings. Nothing would persuade him that he had anything to fear. He fancied himself immune from attack; even the relentless attack of a man whose violent crusade nothing would put a stop to, save imprisonment for criminal libel.

"The trouble with you, Oscar," he said, "is that you're not a realist."

The remark appeared to shock Wilde.

"I should hope not," he said, pretending to shiver at the very thought of such a thing. "But how strange, Bosie, that you should have mentioned the fact at this moment. I have

insisted here"—he tapped the sheets of paper with his scarab ring—"that realism is something towards which I have no leanings whatever. The example I give is quite amusing I think. It is sure to distress the reporters."

He glanced down at the paper again, and read slowly:

"If a journalist is run over by a four-wheeler in the Strand, an incident I regret to say I have never witnessed, it suggests nothing to me from a dramatic point of view. Perhaps I am wrong; but the artist must have his limitations."

Once Douglas had laughed—as in spite of himself he did now—the tension was broken. Often they would recover their equanimity at the very height of a quarrel. A chance phrase uttered by one of them, a glance mutually understood, and all that had gone before was quickly forgotten. Douglas surrendered easily to the ineffable charm that bound him in affection to this man who, for all the seniority of his years, was a wonderfully stimulating companion; and Wilde no longer saw the boy as his 'evil genius', but instead as a golden Ariel whom it flattered his vanity to possess, and to forgive.

He took Douglas's chin in his hand and smiled into his eyes. The other smiled back; then abruptly turned away, as if the sentiment expressed by the gesture shamed him a little.

"I have decided," Wilde announced, "to go abroad; to Algiers, I thought, in search of the sun. Should you feel like coming with me, Bosie? . . ."

"Abroad?" said Douglas in astonishment. "How can you possibly go away in the middle of rehearsals?"

"I am not wanted at rehearsals. I get on Alexander's nerves quite as much, it seems, as he gets on mine. If I don't leave the company to themselves, he says, they will never be ready in time. His idea is that I shall return for the first performance. So considerate of dear Alec! I shall of course be back in time for the dress-rehearsal."

"But do you really think it is safe," asked Douglas, "to leave everything to him?"

Having pondered the question, Wilde replied, as he tapped the ash from his cigarette :

"I shall expect to find on my return a play that reminds me a little of one that I once wrote called *The Importance of Being Earnest*."

Chapter Three

THE young Frenchman, somewhat reserved in manner and appearance, whose name was André Gide, could not at the moment have said what prompted him to seize the sponge and wipe his name off the slate. Yet the action was an impulsive one, causing him as soon as he had performed it to experience an undeniable sense of relief.

The slate, on which were chalked up the names of visitors staying there, had caught his eye as he was about to leave the hotel, having just paid his bill. Already the bus was on its way to the station with his luggage. And following it slowly on foot, for he had time to spare, he sought a reason for his involuntary gesture.

It might after all have been no more, he thought, than the result of that desire for solitude which lately had possessed him. In a mood of depression such as the one he had been passing through, his inclination to avoid, if he could possibly help it, coming into contact with anyone he knew, was overwhelming. In the presence of others he felt not only ill at ease, but also ashamed of his inability to shake off the air of despondency that clung to him like a wet garment; making him hate and despise himself.

His flight from Paris in search of new surroundings, which he hoped to find flooded with sunshine out of a dazzling blue sky, had proved unsuccessful from the start. Frozen in Algiers by an icy wind blowing from the Atlas Mountains, he had moved on to Mustapha, where the hotels had been too luxurious and crowded for his taste. What he needed was some quiet spot in which to sort himself out, and, should the inspiration be forthcoming, continue with the novel he was at work on. Finally he had reached Bildah, remaining there three days; the victim, still, of a mistaken

belief that spring would greet him in the month of January. The weather actually improved, but his low spirits had not correspondingly changed.

Having reached the station, however, his passion for unearthing the truth—especially the truth about himself—provided him with a certain satisfaction. In the course of his walk he had come reluctantly to admit that the two names appearing on the slate in close proximity to his own, must partly have been responsible for his unpremeditated action. Or rather, it was less the names themselves that had startled him, causing his heart to miss a beat, than the fact that they were coupled together.

In any case he decided to face the situation, regardless of consequences; for the good of his soul, if for no other reason. His soul was always of the utmost importance to him: and self-sacrifice as a means of preserving its inviolability, he had sometimes found, brought its own immensely satisfying reward.

The names he had read on the slate were those of Mr. Oscar Wilde and Lord Alfred Douglas.

While the latter was a stranger to him, the former he knew sufficiently well to number among his acquaintances, if not his friends. They had met fairly frequently in Paris as guests of the same hostess, and had taken a liking to one another. At least Gide admired Wilde: and since Wilde addressed him always by his first name—"My *dear* André", he could hear him saying, in that mellifluous voice of his that compelled attention to whatever he said, irrespective of its value—he imagined that the admiration was mutual.

Recalling the last time he had met him—about a year ago it must have been—he could not help smiling at the thought of what Wilde had then said to him :

"I will tell you a secret, my dear André. It is this," he had lowered his voice, at the same time looking round him dramatically as if fearful of being overheard: "I have put all my genius into my life, but only my talent into my works."

How seriously the confession was to be taken, it was difficult to say. Often he appeared to speak only for effect, delighting in the enthusiasm with which an audience greeted the epigrams that fell as naturally from his lips as did the ash from his cigarette.

But here there was some evidence to support his contention, for even by his fervent disciples it was acknowledged that Wilde's invention of himself as a unique personality exceeded in originality anything to be found in his writings. Those who considered him tiresome to read, comparing his prose to an over elaborate piece of embroidery, and in other instances accusing him of a preoccupation with unsavoury themes, immediately forgot their prejudice in his company, when the seemingly effortless charm of his conversation held them enchained. They were greatly entertained by the part he wrote himself in life, and which he acted with such unerring skill. He saw to it that they were never disappointed.

Yet something far graver than mere disappointment had lately disturbed Wilde's friends in Paris. They were afraid for him, on account of rumours concerning his behaviour in London that had travelled swiftly across the Channel; raising speculation as to what the outcome might be if he were not more discreet.

These rumours Gide—completely honest with himself at last—saw to have been the cause of his wiping his name off the slate. He had done it instinctively, wishing to dissociate himself from the atmosphere of suspicion surrounding Wilde and Douglas. Not that he himself was a moralist, in the puritanical sense; but outwardly he observed the conventions, if only because he was still too young to have the courage of his inclinations. Besides, he had no wish deliberately to flout public opinion, which, if hearsay was to be believed, Wilde took a positive delight in doing. Such behaviour he considered to be unnecessary, and a trifle vulgar.

Having returned to the hotel and unpacked his few belongings once more, Gide flopped down on the bed and took up the translation of *Barnaby Rudge* he was reading. Dickens

was a favourite of his; he admired the Englishman's intense humanity, and the genius he had for creating a strange world of his own in which it was possible to lose oneself.

But now his thoughts kept wandering from the book. Wilde's image floated before his eyes, and in imagination he heard again the cadences of that arresting voice of his. If he and Douglas had been staying in the hotel, how was it that he hadn't run across them? Perhaps they kept to their room; had their meals sent up to them; went out very seldom. In which case he might not meet them after all. Unless he wrote Wilde a note.

Or would that be unwise? For a moment the fear of compromising himself by renewing the acquaintance returned, only to be dismissed instantly as a piece of cowardice on his part. He should be able to face without embarrassment any situation that arose. A seeker after truth, which was how he liked to regard himself, had no right to avoid an issue simply because it threatened his own safety. Besides, he thought, in all probability these rumours had been spread by malicious persons jealous of Wilde's success.

Often the expression a man wears who believes himself to be alone, gives a true indication of what his innermost feelings are. And the man reclining in a wicker basket chair on the terrace of the hotel, at whom Gide now peered cautiously from behind a pillar, certainly looked untroubled; as if, indeed, he had not a care in the world.

After some hours spent intermittently pondering the matter, Gide had come to the conclusion that his fears were groundless, and should not therefore be allowed to influence him. And he had left the bedroom with his mind made up to find his friend—as he now chose to call Wilde. But coming upon him with such unexpected suddenness, he hesitated to make his presence known: partly in order to gain self-confidence, and partly from a desire to satisfy his curiosity.

So far as he could tell from where he stood, Wilde had not altered noticeably in appearance. That he looked perhaps a little fatter could have been the result of his wearing a white

suit. He had always made Gide think of a weary giant, and his present attitude of repose accentuated the illusion that he lacked sufficient strength to support his body. Even the limp way he held his cigarette, dangling between two fingers, suggested that he found it too heavy to raise to his lips. His dark hair, worn long and carefully waved, still managed to look like a wig—though a wig of the nicest fit and finest quality. And of course he wore a flower in his buttonhole. Nobody had ever seen him without one, and it was said he changed it several times a day.

As Gide approached, Wilde looked up, recognising him instantly:

“My *dear* André! What a delightful surprise.”

Struggling to his feet, he shook the young man warmly by the hand, obviously glad to see him. But catching sight of the book he carried, his face fell.

“Don’t tell me, dear boy,” he said, with mock concern, “that you are able to read Dickens?”

Gide admitted to a liking for his works.

“Well, I dare say he will do you no harm. The ‘divine Boz’ I suppose you call him?”

“But he has a great sense of humour.”

“Indeed he has.” Wilde shook his head: “One must have a heart of stone to read the death of Little Nell without laughing.”

Gide noticed now that his friend’s face had coarsened; the flesh was a little puffy in places, and the sensual mouth dragged slightly at the corners. He was developing, too, a heavy jowl, to disguise which, whenever he thought of it, he held his head erect. But after a few moments in his company these defects were forgotten. The man radiated a sort of gaiety that was infectious. It was as if, having himself discovered the joy of life, he insisted upon others sharing it with him.

Drinks were ordered; mutual friends inquired after; and these preliminaries over, Wilde, lounging in his wicker chair, gave himself up to the serious art of conversation.

"Did I understand you to say, André, that you had come to this lovely spot to work?" he asked.

"I am trying to write a novel. I came from Paris for that purpose."

"Oh, but really you must do nothing of the sort. In such heavenly surroundings as these, your duty is to plunge madly into amusement. I do—all the time."

"But are you doing no work?"

Wilde waved the suggestion aside. And after a brief pause, calculated to heighten the effect of what he was about to say, spoke as slowly and distinctly as if he were addressing a child:

"I am fleeing from art. Have you never noticed how the sun detests thought? The sun always causes thought to withdraw itself and take refuge in the shade. Thought dwelt in Egypt originally, but the sun conquered Egypt; then it lived for a long time in Greece; and the sun conquered Greece; then in Italy and then in France. Nowadays all thought is driven as far back as Norway and Russia, places where the sun never goes. The sun is jealous of art."

Unfamiliar with the English language, Gide was thankful for the fluency with which the other spoke French. And never having heard before the colourful improvisations that Wilde chanted so beautifully, he was ready to declare himself willing to listen to them for hours at a time. Compared to most of the monologues one endured, particularly from artists who believed they had a message to deliver, Wilde's, in spite of its artificial tendencies, was something to be grateful for, he thought. And he was more than sorry, when in the middle of a fable he was relating to illustrate some theory of his, the story-teller was suddenly interrupted by the appearance at his side of a youth obviously in a violent temper.

He looked scarcely more than eighteen, and was strikingly handsome in a golden-haired, fresh-complexioned sort of way. In fact he was a conspicuous example of the *jeunes dorées* of his period. The features were sensitive, yet curiously devoid of innocence. Perhaps in more favourable circum-

stances his face could have passed for that of a disagreeable angel nursing a grudge against humanity. But distorted by fury as it now was, devilish seemed about the best description of it. His manner was decidedly arrogant, and every movement of his body, as he flung himself about, showed his awareness of its physical attraction.

This impression Gide got merely from observing the youth, whose words—apart from their constituting a stream of shrilly uttered invective—he had no means of understanding. Though he gathered vaguely that the cause of the tirade had something to do with a letter he brandished in his hand. Also it was fairly apparent that his abuse was intended for someone other than Wilde, since the latter made no attempt to answer him, but contented himself with an occasional monosyllabic interjection.

With the suddenness of his arrival, the youth took his departure, flouncing from the scene with a backward jerk of the head that removed a straying lock of hair from his eyes.

"Bosie will get into such tempers," said Wilde, apologetically. "He can be dreadfully unreasonable at times, I'm afraid. A letter from his father has upset him. His father is a little mad, of course. I have good reason to know it. But Bosie is not likely to help matters by fighting him with his own weapons. I don't like to think what he is sitting down to write at this moment."

That Bosie was Lord Alfred Douglas, it was left to Gide to guess. No formal introduction had been possible. Once or twice during the outburst Wilde had sought to call his friend's attention to the presence of a guest, but without avail. Beyond throwing him a glance of insolent disapproval, the youth had ignored Gide completely.

"You know," went on Wilde, who seemed unwilling to leave the subject, "Bosie is devoted to me. I'm sure of it. But sometimes I could wish that he would try to please me more often—instead of expecting me always to indulge his whims. You have no idea, André, how perverse he can be when things don't go exactly as he wants them to."

Considering the scene he had just witnessed, Gide felt that he had a pretty shrewd idea of the lengths to which Lord Alfred Douglas would be prepared to go in order to get his own way. But he said nothing. He saw that Wilde needed someone to whom he could confide his troubles, and it seemed only polite to listen. The man's gaiety had for the moment deserted him.

"In London a short while ago," said Wilde, adopting a confidential tone that emphasised the sincerity of his words, "Bosie and I were staying together at the Savoy Hotel. We had a charming suite of rooms overlooking the Thames, but took most of our meals in the restaurant downstairs. Of course a great number of people there knew me by sight. I happened at the time to have a successful play running, and pictures of me were appearing in the illustrated papers. So to avoid being stared at, I chose on purpose a table as far away from the main entrance as possible; one easily reached by a side door leading to the residential part of the hotel. But do you know, when Bosie, who was waiting for me one day, saw me come in by this little door, he created the most terrible scene. He insisted that in future I come in with him by the main entrance. He wanted everyone to see us, and to exclaim: 'Look—there goes Oscar Wilde and his friend!' Wasn't that dreadful of him?"

The anecdote could only have been told to discredit Douglas by exposing his vanity and his wilfulness. Yet in telling it Wilde had not sounded as if he were seriously upset by what had occurred. And Gide wondered if in his heart he did not secretly enjoy being dictated to by someone half his own age; as an elderly lover often enjoys being ordered about by his young mistress.

"Of course you will dine with us, André?" said Wilde, easing himself out of his chair. "Here we take all our meals in private. Bosie has no wish to show me off to the guests in this hotel. None of them would have the least idea who I am, anyway."

Feeling that he had been asked more out of politeness

than anything else, and intimidated by the thought of how Douglas might receive him, Gide declined the invitation.

"Then after dinner, shall we say? Bosie and I had thought of taking a stroll. I believe this town can be quite bewitching if one knows one's way around. I don't, unfortunately. But I'm sure that we shall find a guide who is only too willing to assist us."

In the months to come, watching Wilde from a distance as the principal actor in a drama of his own contrivance, but in which, as it played itself out, his performance seemed to falter, Gide was often to recall the two white-clad figures as they faced him that night after dinner, in the lounge of the hotel.

At the foot of the staircase Wilde stood with one hand resting limply on his friend's shoulder, while the latter stroked it gently with the tips of his fingers, in a gesture of affection. The effect was of a pose held to oblige some photographer, and could have been taken by an unprejudiced observer to suggest the warm friendship existing between a father and his son.

"But you're not ready," said Douglas, addressing himself to the Frenchman as if he were an old friend, instead of someone to whom he had not been introduced, and a short while before had pointedly ignored. "Oscar tells me you are coming out with us. I do hope you are."

Gide could not quite make up his mind. He felt an instinctive dislike for Douglas, yet wondered if on becoming better acquainted with him he might not be persuaded to change his opinion. There was a radiance about him now, a gracefulness of carriage, a sort of poetic beauty even. It was not difficult to see what Wilde found attractive about him, at least so far as his appearance went. Perhaps his spasms of temper could be overlooked as being of no more importance than a child's occasional tantrums. Also it occurred to Gide that by associating only with spirits who were congenial to him, he was limiting his own powers as a writer.

"Of course he is coming with us," said Wilde. "Fetch your hat and coat, André. We will wait for you."

At once Douglas objected.

"I will wait," he said. "You go on, Oscar. You walk so slowly. We will catch you up."

Resigned to taking his friend's instructions, Wilde, with a shrug of his broad shoulders, turned to obey. When Gide came from his room a few minutes later, having combed his hair and changed his tie, Douglas took him affectionately by the arm and led him out of the hotel.

"Where are we going?" asked Gide, who, although he resented the other's familiarity, did not like to remove his arm.

"To a café I know of—where we shall be able to pick up simply anything we fancy." Douglas looked into Gide's face, and smiled mysteriously: "I'm sure you dislike women as much as I do. I knew the moment I saw you that you were *sympathique*. Of course you are!"

Recovering from the pleasures of the previous night with the aid of sherry-cobblers, the three occupants of the terrace looked less like individuals than picturesque types: an *idea* that some impressionistic painter had clothed with flesh. *Sybarites 1895*, the picture could have been called—a composition in which the vivid colours of the Orient, the warmth of the noonday sun, and the somnolence of the dandiacal figures exposed to its rays (like pieces of fine linen put out to dry) had been caught for posterity.

His large body supported by a wicker *chaise-longue*, and his eyes gazing dreamily at the mauve shadow of a ragged palm imprinted on the pink-washed wall opposite, Wilde spoke softly and endlessly; philosophising as much for his own entertainment, it seemed, as for Gide's. Douglas, seated at the other end of the terrace, wrote at infrequent intervals in an exercise book propped against one knee.

A fable he had been listening to having reached its climax, enabling the narrator to enjoy for a silent moment its dra-

matic effect, Gide asked why, since he was so reluctant to part with the sun, Wilde proposed returning immediately to London.

"Surely you can write as easily here?" he said.

"It is not a question of writing," said Wilde. "I have to attend the rehearsals of a new play of mine that is being put on in London. 'A trivial comedy for serious people' I have called it. Its title is *The Importance of Being Earnest*."

"Oh, that is different," said Gide. "You have something to look forward to. No wonder you are anxious to leave."

"But I am not in the least anxious to leave. The mere thought of passing through a sordid stage-door appals me. You have no idea how troublesome actors are. Impossible creatures to deal with! I have often thought how much I would prefer to have my plays performed entirely by puppets."

"Puppets, did you say?"

"They never argue, you see! They have no crude views about art. They have no private lives. One is never bothered by accounts of their virtues, or bored by recitals of their vices. And when they are out of an engagement they never do good in public. Nor do they speak more than is set down for them. They recognise the presiding genius of the dramatist, and have never been known to ask for their parts to be written up."

"Are you ever serious, Oscar?"

"I am serious now, dear boy. And not without reason. Lately, in Paris, I saw a performance by puppets of Shakespeare's *Tempest*. Their gestures were quite sufficient, and the words that seemed to come from their little lips were spoken by poets who had beautiful voices. It was a delightful performance and I remember it still with delight." He added as an afterthought, on a note of regret: "Though Miranda, of course, took no notice of the flowers I sent her after the curtain fell."

He dislikes actors, yet what an actor he himself is, Gide thought. And how willingly one listens to him. Those who

insisted that his 'rehearsed' speeches, as they called them, soon began to pall, could only be people, surely, who soon missed the sound of their own voices.

An Arab waiter moved stealthily across the terrace, and with exaggerated obeisance offered up some letters that had arrived by the post, rather as if they were the precious symbols in a religious rite he was performing. Wilde took them from him with a graciousness that distinguished all his actions—a natural courtesy on his part that those who disapproved of him misrepresented as being a regal air that it pleased his conceit to assume—and commenced to slit the envelopes.

"You will excuse me, André?"

"But of course."

Presently, chuckling to himself, he looked up from the letter in his hand:

"Too amusing!" he said. "The spelling, I mean. What a pity you don't understand English. It is from a dear friend of mine who is a groom, or something."

"A groom, did you say?"

"Yes. I have some quite odd friends, you know. But all of them are delightful in their way. Where youth is concerned I make no social distinctions."

Douglas slowly approached them, fanning himself gently with the exercise book.

"Any letters for me?" he asked.

"None," said Wilde. "Not even one from your dear father."

"I have written a very good poem," said Douglas. He announced, rather than mentioned, the fact; as if he considered it to be news of considerable importance.

Wilde smiled at him indulgently: "Busy little Bosie," he said. Then turning to Gide, added: "He will spend his time writing pretty verses. I really can't think why."

Douglas turned on him sharply: "Have you any objection, Oscar?" he said.

"You know I haven't, Bosie. I am always telling you that

it doesn't matter in the least *what* you do, since you happen to be a charming and graceful young man, related to everyone in the peerage, who does whatever he wants to do in a charming and graceful manner."

This flattery partially succeeded in calming the young man's ruffled spirits. Instead of, as had seemed likely, flying into a rage, he sulked.

"Then why do you blame me for working?" he asked.

"It is of your looks I am thinking," said Wilde.

"You harp too much on my good looks, Oscar."

"Not at all. Real beauty ends where an intellectual expression begins. The moment one sits down to think, one becomes all nose, all forehead, or something horrid. Look at the successful men in any of the professions, how perfectly hideous they are! Except, of course, in the Church. But then in the Church they don't think. A bishop goes on saying at the age of eighty what he was told when he was a boy of eighteen; and as a natural consequence he always looks absolutely delightful."

But Douglas could not be bothered to listen. From constant repetition his friend's epigrams had grown stale in his ears. And in any case he knew that at the moment they were being trotted out for the Frenchman's benefit. Opening the exercise book, he muttered under his breath some lines of verse—then closed it abruptly.

"Very nearly perfect," he said, looking pointedly at Gide. "If you could read them you would see how infinitely better my poem's are than Oscar's. I shall translate them for you, then you'll be able to tell me if I'm not right."

"Most kind of you," said Gide.

The hour before luncheon passed pleasantly enough. But Gide was not altogether at his ease in the company of this seemingly ill-assorted couple. He could not be certain from one moment to the next that a perfectly innocent remark of Wilde's wouldn't be taken exception to by Douglas. A tense atmosphere prevailed, of which neither of them possibly was aware, but that nevertheless made a stranger apprehensive

of the scene likely to flare up without warning. Not that Wilde, who had an aversion to anything approaching unpleasantness, seemed to be at fault. Douglas was the one to blame. Or could it be, Gide wondered, that in anyone else's company Douglas might have behaved differently? Perhaps for reasons beyond his control, Wilde was the very person to bring out the worst in his friend, causing him to exhibit, as if they were something to be proud of, his least endearing qualities?

"Be an angel, Bosie," said Wilde, "and fetch me my cigarettes from my room. I am too fatigued to mount the stairs."

Surprisingly, Douglas complied with the request; if somewhat ungraciously:

"Oh, very well. Where shall I find them?"

"In their usual place, by the bed. I am *always* tidy. Which reminds me, my dear, that you are not. How often must I tell you never to leave letters lying about for prying eyes to read? In a drawer in your room this morning—I went there to retrieve a tie of mine—I noticed several letters that I wrote to you over a year ago. Why do you not destroy them?"

"You would be perfectly furious if I did," said Douglas, adding in a stage-whisper to Gide: "Oscar regards his letters as masterpieces."

"Some of them are, Bosie. But the point is that people in our position cannot afford to leave letters lying about. You ought to have learned by now that it is not always safe. The last thing we want is a recurrence of the ordeal I suffered not so long ago—entirely, I may say, owing to your incurable negligence."

"It's strange to hear you talk of safety," said Douglas, as he turned and went into the hotel.

Seeing the slightly puzzled look that Gide was unable to hide, Wilde, after a moment's hesitation, enlightened him:

"It is not," he said, "a story I care to be reminded of.

But I shall tell it to you, André, for your own sake. So that when you are tempted to write to someone you are fond of, you may pause first to consider how maliciously words can be misconstrued by those who wish to harm your reputation."

Before saying any more, he finished his drink and called to the Arab waiter, who hovered within ear-shot, to bring three fresh ones. Gide's protest that he did not want another drink himself, was ignored. If he had been asked what change he noticed in Wilde since their last meeting, he would have said the fact that he was never without a drink in front of him, or a cigarette between his fingers. Nor was it Wilde's drinking and smoking to excess that struck Gide, so much as the impression he gave of indulging himself more out of habit, than from choice. He seemed at times to be disguising a naturally restless disposition with the pretence of being merely a pleasure-loving idler, a contented lotus-eater. He was like a man not entirely himself; a man with something on his mind, in fact.

He said at last:

"It is more than a year ago since the episode I am speaking of occurred. When still up at Oxford, Bosie left a number of letters I had written to him in the pocket of an old suit of clothes that he gave to an unemployed clerk. The clerk's name was Wood, and together with a couple of other blackmailers—whose names I am not likely to forget either, Allen and Cliburn they called themselves—he tried to extort money from me. And I'm afraid succeeded. Foolishly I gave him fifteen pounds for the letters, only to discover after he had gone that one of them was missing.

"A copy of this letter, however, was sent anonymously to Beerbohm Tree, the actor, who passed it on to me, saying that he thought the sentiments expressed in it might be open to misconstruction. And there I hoped the matter would end. But unfortunately it did not. A few days later Master Allen called at my house, with the original letter. He said a man had offered him sixty pounds for it.

“‘If you take my advice,’ I told him, ‘you will go to that man and sell my letter to him for sixty pounds. I myself have never received so large a sum for any prose work of that length : but I am glad to find that someone in England considers a letter of mine worth sixty pounds.’

“After some argument the fellow changed his tone. He admitted he was penniless, and that he had been on many occasions trying to find me. I gave him half a sovereign, and he went away.”

“But you had your letter back?” said Gide.

Wilde enjoined silence by raising a finger.

“I did not. But listen. Five minutes later the door-bell rang again. This time it was Master Cliburn. By now, as you may imagine, I was growing a little weary of the whole business. And I said so at once. But to my astonishment Cliburn produced the letter- and returned it to me. It appears he had conferred with Allen, in the street outside, and come to the conclusion that trying to bluff me was a waste of time. I gave *him* half a sovereign, and he left me. That is the whole story.”

Gide was full of concern:

“How worried you must have been, Oscar.”

“At the time--yes. But really the letter was no more than a sort of ‘prose poem’. You may even have read it, André.”

“I may have read it?”

“It’s possible. Our friend, Pierre Louys, turned it into a sonnet. It was published in French. I am not sure now how it went, but the words of the letter, of course, I remember perfectly.”

Closing his eyes, he recited slowly :

“My own Boy --Your sonnet was quite lovely, and it is a marvel that those red rose-leaf lips of yours should have been made no less for the music of song than for the madness of kisses. Your slim gilt soul walks between passion and poetry. I know Hyacinthus, whom Apollo loved so madly, was you in Greek days. Why are you in London, and when do you go to Salisbury? Do go there to cool your hands in

the grey twilight of Gothic things, and come here whenever you like. It is a lovely place—it lacks only you; but go to Salisbury first. . . .”

When he had finished, Gide said:

“How happy Bosie must have been to receive that letter.”

Wilde was about to make some comment, when the subject of the letter approached. He placed a silver box on the arm of the chair.

“Your cigarettes, Oscar. Never say that I do nothing for you!”

“Thank you, dear boy.”

Wilde opened the box and held it out to Gide:

“Can I offer you one of my perfumed cigarettes?” he said. “A cigarette is the perfect type of a perfect pleasure. It is exquisite, and it leaves one unsatisfied. What more can one want?”

Douglas put down his drink, to say:

“*Will* you stop acting, Oscar.”

Wilde looked at him wistfully.

“But I like acting. It is so much more real than real life.”

“Is that true, do you think?” said Gide.

A smile flitted across Wilde’s face as he paused in the act of striking a match.

“Nothing, André, is ever *quite* true.”

Chapter Four

IF at this period—at which his career had all but reached its zenith—an impartial inquirer had solicited from the public in general, and his friends in particular, a symposium on the subject of how Oscar Wilde impressed them, he must have encountered a diversity of opinion. The sources of information open to him would alone have been an indication of his quarry's considerable fame; of the heights he had reached and the depths he had explored.

Where to start his inquiries would have been a problem, so wide was the area to be covered, ranging as it did from the strongholds of the aristocracy to the humbler dwellings of the proletariat. Had he felt so inclined, the Prince of Wales himself might have condescended to remark that upon more than one occasion he had immensely enjoyed Mr. Wilde's company. And by way of contrast (had they been assured first that it was not a policeman who put the question) a private soldier, or a groom out of employment, would have made the same admission.

By all classes of society save the lower middle-class, which from the first had mistrusted his gay insouciance—Wilde was regarded as an entertainer second to none. Quite extraordinary was the speed with which his utterances travelled. In no time at all a witticism he had given birth to in the most exclusive circles found an echo in the mouths of cab-drivers and bus-conductors. For by them he was looked upon as a wag. And a wag was somebody they could appreciate, for whom they had a certain respect.

Asked his opinion of Wilde (whose name over the years had become a household word to him) the man in the street would as likely as not have advised a consultation with his wife: "She did our drawing-room up according

to the fellow's ideas. Can't say I was much taken with it myself. Some time ago, that was. But have a word with her."

Young wives scattered all over the country, having heard Mr. Wilde's lecture on 'The Home Beautiful', had transformed at least one room in the house in obedience to his commands. In the early eighties their cumbrous mahogany sideboards had been supplanted by delicate cabinets filled with blue china, on which stood vases sprouting peacocks' feathers. Heavy plush curtains gave way to green silken draperies; walls had been stripped of hideously patterned paper to reveal primrose expanses hung with a single etching by Doré; and Art-coal-scuttles reigned proudly on the hearth. Also there were Japanese screens, on the disposal of which the Master had advised: "Do not arrange them, let them occur."

Nor by the wife with a mind of her own was Wilde looked upon merely as an arbiter of indoor fashion. He was also an author who, incredibly, understood women. A deliciously witty person whose clever sayings were quoted everywhere. A pet of Society, in fact, caricatures of whom, conversing with duchesses, constantly appeared in the pages of *Punch*.

The duchesses themselves, to whom the clever sayings were first addressed, had only good to say of him. In a sense he belonged to them. They had 'taken him up'. Without his scintillating presence their house parties would have suffered an irreparable loss. Not to have had him as a guest amounted to an admission of failure: failure to wrest him from a rival hostess, or to dissociate themselves from the stuffy die-hards of a past generation to whose country mansions a visit was considered merely a painful duty.

In distant America, even, the illustrious Oscar Wilde was still fondly remembered for the entertainment he had given its citizens during a tour of their country in 1882. Then he had been a young man with a reputation, but by no means a fortune, firmly established in London. In fact:

A most intense young man,
A soulful-eyed young man,
An ultra poetical, super-aesthetical
out-of-the-way young man.

In the Reginald Bunthorne of their comic opera *Patience*, Gilbert and Sullivan had burlesqued the pose that Wilde adopted, and successfully exploited, during the chrysalis stage of his social adventure. Out of it was to develop the dandy and playwright he later became. But the chrysalis was sufficiently impressive on its own account to have earned him a thriving notoriety, of which the management presenting *Patience* in New York took advantage by persuading him to appear there as a lecturer, slightly in advance of the play's opening. He did not disappoint his sponsors. To exhibit his pose in new surroundings, thereby attracting fresh applause, to say nothing of dollars, was an opportunity not to be missed.

The pose with which he amused London in those days had found its inspiration in the Aesthetic School, of which he had made himself the acknowledged symbol. And as the arch-aesthete he crossed the Atlantic; observing to the customs inspector who searched his baggage as the boat docked: "I have nothing to declare but my genius."

Throughout the United States he faced audiences wearing plush knee-breeches, silk stockings, a tail coat and floppy white tie. The pen-portrait drawn by a reporter sent from the *Lady's Pictorial* to interview him at his hotel, was one upon which he may well have looked back with amusement; or wistful regret perhaps, for the boyish side of his nature, his love of dressing-up and showing off, remained always a part of him: the undeveloped part, whose limitations he seemed incapable of recognising.

"In a languid, half-enervated manner," according to the *Pictorial*, "he gently sipped hot chocolate from a cup by his side. Occasionally he inhaled a long deep whiff from a smouldering cigarette held lightly in his white and shapely hand. He was attired in a smoking suit of dark brown velvet

faced with lapels of red quilted silk. The ends of a long dark necktie floated over the facings like seaweed on foam tinged by the dying sun. Dark brown nether garments, striped with red up the seam, and patent leather shoes with light cloth uppers completed the rest of the poet's costume.

"A white walking-stick which he was in the habit of carrying was presented to him at the Acropolis and was said to have been cut from the olive groves of the Academia. Only in the evening was he wont to don knee-breeches; but evening and morning alike find him neither more nor less than a man, and always a perfect gentleman.

"Long masses of dark brown hair, parted in the middle, fell in odd curves of beauty over his broad shoulders. He wore neither beard nor moustache. The full, rather sensuous lips, now pressed close together, now parted in a kindly smile, showed to perfection the nobility of his countenance. A Grecian nose and a well-tinged flush of health on the poet's face added all that was required to make it a truly remarkable one."

On his return to England it had seemed uneconomical not to deliver a lecture on his experiences in America.

"Everybody over there," he told his listeners, "seems in a hurry to catch a train. This state of things is not favourable to poetry or romance. Had Romeo or Juliet been in a constant state of anxiety about trains, or had their minds been agitated by the question of return-tickets, Shakespeare could not have given us those lovely balcony scenes so full of poetry and pathos."

Niagara was a disappointment to him :

"Most people must be disappointed with Niagara," he said. "Every American bride is taken there, and the sight of the stupendous waterfall must be one of the earliest, if not the keenest, disappointments of American married life."

That no one could fill an hour more amusingly than Oscar Wilde, was the opinion held, even in these early days, not only by guests privileged to hear him discourse in private, but also by customers crowding the lecture halls. They were

the days when Oscar and Society mutually benefited one another. Days when it intrigued beautiful Lily Langtry to receive from him a slim volume of poems inscribed 'To Helen, formerly of Troy, now of London'; as much as it intrigued him to present it to the woman who had aroused the admiration of the Prince of Wales. Recalling later their intimacy at this time, the gracious beauty whose calf-lover he was accepted as by the gossips (a situation neither of them discouraged) said of him:

"He was large, about six foot, and broad in proportion; grotesque in manner, but had a remarkably fascinating and compelling personality, and what in an actor would be termed wonderful 'stage presence'. The plainness of his face was redeemed by the splendour of his great large eyes. He had, too, one of the most alluring voices I ever heard, round and soft and full of variety."

Particular friends of Wilde's from whom the impartial inquirer might have obtained material for his dossier, included two fervent disciples. If discovered in a confidential mood, and assured, like the soldier and the groom, that nothing they said would be used in evidence against them, these gentlemen could have told an uneasy tale of what they considered to be the Master's impropriety. It was not his morals that either Robert Ross or Reginald Turner disapproved of. Indeed they were in no position to do so, since their own inclinations lay in the same direction. But by the reckless manner in which their friend flouted public opinion, the injudiciousness he indulged in that if carried much further must result in scandal, they were seriously alarmed. And this unsafe behaviour of his they attributed, in part at least, to his unfortunate association with Lord Alfred Douglas; a youth whose influence they viewed with the gravest suspicion. In their estimation, that summer's afternoon in 1891 on which a mutual friend had taken the young man along to the house in Tite Street, Chelsea, and introduced him to the Master, was a day of ill omen; and the meeting

itself an event whose immediate consequences and their repercussions were destined to no good purpose.

Jealousy may have coloured a little the view taken by Mr. Ross and Mr. Turner of this youth, still up at Oxford, whose qualities they recognised as the ones most likely to have an irresistible appeal for their friend. His ancient Scottish title, no less than his extravagant good-looks, could be a threat to their own position as the Master's cherished acolytes: His 'dear Robbie' and his 'dear Reggie', as he called them. They were not blind to Wilde's preoccupation with the names in *Debrett*, nor to the childish pride he took in numbering them among his acquaintances. The poet with soulful eyes, carrying a walking-stick cut from the olive-groves of the Academia, had long since made way for the dandy swinging a gold-headed Malacca cane. He was on intimate terms now with the leaders of rank and fashion, a position to which he had aspired on first arriving in London: one, too, upon which the seal seemed finally set by having for his bosom companion and devoted admirer a boy who, in addition to looking like Shelley, happened also to be an aristocrat.

But in fact their jealousy of Douglas was not important either to Robert Ross or to Reginald Turner. That at times he was instrumental in distracting Wilde's attention from themselves, they were worldly enough to accept without demur. What they could not forgive him for, however, was the propensity he had for attracting everyone else's attention, by turning his association with a man many years his senior into a spectacle that aroused public suspicion. Not content to be Wilde's shadow, following at his heels from morning till night, he flagrantly encouraged an entourage of hangers-on, at sight of which anyone might understandably raise his eyebrows: a raffish collection of working-class boys whose companionship was unlikely to have been sought for any but subversive reasons.

Had these sons of joy kept in hiding it would not so much have mattered. But they were exhibited in smart restaurants,

and in boxes at West End theatres, with a disregard for the fitness of things that amounted to nothing less than bravado. It was behaviour to which Mr. Ross and Mr. Turner, men driven underground in their pursuit of sensuous enjoyment, objected on account of the danger it threatened. Members of their brotherhood could not afford openly to proclaim sexual abnormality; least of all their friend, whose social position should have made him doubly careful not to offend the scruples of the populace.

Was it true to say that success had gone to Wilde's head? His friends were inclined to agree that such might be the case. Though in his personal relationships he was as kind, and gentle, and considerate of others as he had always been. The change in him they noticed had more to do with the manner in which he lived: the extravagance, bordering on vulgarity, he gave way to in his search for new pleasures. It was as if he enjoyed luxury for its own sake. He ate too much rich food; took no exercise whatever; developed a flabby body and a blotched, unhealthy-looking skin. His speech, too, had become strangely arrogant for one so innately kind-hearted.

In fact he had reached that dangerous stage when a man's phantasy-life catches up with his real one, forcing him to live precariously on two levels at the same time. Taken at its surface value his pose as a decadent emperor caused unfriendly critics, of whom he had not a few, to liken him to Nero. Others saw him only as 'a great white slug'. It took a woman of intuition to separate the man from his pose; to see in him no greater fault than weakness; to discover the soul of the artist, that the artist himself, unavoidably it seemed, was at such pains to disguise.

"Oscar is the most generous man I have ever met," is how Mrs. Ada Leverson would have described him to the inquirer. "He shows his kindness always in the most graceful way. Why, I can think of any number of people he has helped with money and advice, some of them almost strangers to him. Nothing is too much trouble when it's a

case of helping someone else. He's only lazy on his own behalf."

Mrs. Levenson, a clever writer herself, a friend whom Wilde called 'The Sphinx', sang his praises endlessly. To her he was an entirely lovable creature, possessed of a heavenly sense of humour. One sees her asking the inquirer to wait while she finds amongst her notes from him an example of dear Oscar's delightful inconsequence. . . . Yes, here is one that expresses exactly what she means. Its opening phrase could have been written by no one else: "Dear Sphinx—This quite wrong rose-coloured paper was left here by someone else, and I am using it by mistake. . . ."

Further to illustrate her friend's life-loving sense of fun she could have repeated the story told of him when accosted in the street by a beggar who protested that he had no work to do and no bread to eat. "Work!" said Wilde. "Why should you want to work? And bread! Why should you eat bread?" He put his hand on the man's shoulder: "Now if you had come to me and said that you had work to do, but you could not think of working, and that you had bread to eat but could not think of eating bread, I would have given you two shillings and sixpence. As it is, I shall give you half a crown."

There were others too, like Ada Levenson, who, being close friends of his, knew the man for what he was: saw clearly his infinite good-nature, the integrity of character that lay beneath the rich coating of affectation, sharply spiced with wit. But never wit whose intention was to wound. There was not a grain of malice in him. He was no one's enemy. Which made it harder for him to realise, when the time came, how many enemies he himself had. How many there were, watchers at a distance, to whom nothing could give greater satisfaction than the sight of him dragged from his pinnacle of fame and hurled into the mud.

If it had not struck, the hour was close at hand when these enemies of his were to come into their own. True, they had still a few minutes to wait before the curtain rose on their

favourite play; always the one in which a man is tortured by his self-righteous judges, in whose place they comfortably see themselves. And waiting, they had to endure the bitterness of watching their victim's final triumph, his last gay gesture to the world; that afterwards, of course, they could always say had made their own triumph the sweeter—increasing as it did the height from which he fell.

Chapter Five

ON Saint Valentine's Night, February 14th, 1895, the weather beloved of melodrama held London in its icy grasp. Driven before a blinding snowstorm, stray pedestrians hurried along with heads bowed, looking in the blurred light of the street lamps like fugitives in flight. To venture out of doors, unless forced by necessity, seemed sheer lunacy. Yet many had defied the elements in order to swell that vast throng of spectators which stood, solidly massed, at one end of King's Street; its gaze fastened intently upon the portals of the St. James's Theatre.

No first-night within living memory matched this one for importance. It was a great social event, to have hovered on the fringe of which would for months afterwards afford the spectators a sense of having played a small part in theatrical history. A block of carriages moved slowly forward from the direction of the Haymarket. Out of victorias, broughams and hansom, distinguished playgoers alighted somewhat precariously on reaching their destination, acknowledging with faintly bewildered smiles the wild cheers that greeted them as they disappeared into the brilliantly lit vestibule.

But once having gained the warmth and brightness of the auditorium, these favoured persons preened themselves like exotic birds in an artificial sunshine, chattering to one another of what the evening might be expected to provide in the way of novelty. For even if the play turned out to be less entertaining than usual—and after all it was a farce, something the author had not before attempted—Oscar himself was sure to have a surprise in store for them. His own performance was always as polished as any actor's, and the curtain speech he wrote himself as witty as any heard upon the stage. How they had laughed on that occasion when

he came before the footlights at the end, saying, as he puffed a cigarette : "*Wasn't* the play delightful? I've enjoyed myself so much." And the time too when, in answer to calls for the author, he'd risen in his box and solemnly announced: "Mr. Wilde is *not* in the house."

Several bejewelled ladies in the stalls were observed to be wearing sprays of lilies of the valley, while certain of the gentlemen sported in their button-holes large carnations, tinted green. Word had gone round among his particular friends that the author favoured these floral tributes to an eventful evening. Nor was the significance of this choice entirely lost upon the audience as a whole, few of whom were unfamiliar with the tantalisingly provocative novel, *The Green Carnation*. So cleverly was Wilde's extravagant personality caricatured in this tale, whose author had preferred to remain anonymous, that he was thought by some to have written it himself: an idea so distasteful to him, however, that he had publicly refuted it:

"I invented that magnificent flower," he had said in his letter to the Press. "But with the middle-class and mediocre book that usurps its strangely beautiful name I have, I need hardly say, nothing whatsoever to do. The flower is a work of art. The book is not."

The air that night was alive with frothy gossip. But it was alive, too, with rumours of a somewhat sinister nature. The gossip was exchanged by women bubbling with admiration: Oscar, they had heard, returning from Algiers in time for his dress-rehearsal, said to the producer as the curtain descended, "Well, I suppose we must start rehearsals on Monday." But to a newspaper reporter who asked him afterwards if he thought his play would be a success, he'd replied, "My dear fellow, you have got it wrong. The play *is* a success. The only question is whether the first-night audience will be one." Such a divinely witty man. As well as a unique personality. When had one ever before come across a playwright with the manners of a gentleman? "In one's own drawing-room," a duchess strangled with pearls was overheard to

say, "he behaves impeccably. And at the dinner-table his epigrams are a positive asset."

Of the dark rumours circulating, only the men had knowledge, and of these the ones wearing green carnations were the best informed. Behind their kid-gloved hands they whispered apprehensively: "That madman Queensberry is on the rampage again. They do say he means to interrupt the play by denouncing Wilde in front of everybody. It's to be hoped, of course, that he'll be prevented by the police. No one has seen him anywhere about. But may he not be hiding in the gallery? Or tucked away somewhere at the back of the pit? How dreadful, for all of us, if he should create a public scandal! Really it's not dear Oscar's fault. Alfred Douglas is mostly to blame. They do say he baits his father in the most outrageous fashion. It's all a family feud, and poor Oscar is being made an excuse for the members of the Douglas Clan to tear each other to pieces. Too utterly monstrous!"

During the greater part of the performance that was to launch his masterpiece upon the world, Wilde remained lurking behind the scenes, a principal actor in a play within a play that was rapidly approaching its own dramatic climax. He felt safer there than he would have done out in front; basking in the warmth of adulation, but at the same time exposed to the possibility of an insult. That trouble was brewing he knew only too well, although the precautions taken to avert it had so far proved successful.

Those rumours spreading inside the theatre had been justified by the events taking place outside it. On the wet, slushy pavements a man beside himself with fury, carrying a 'bouquet' in which bunches of carrots and turnips were twisted to give it a phallic design, stamped his way from one entrance to another, to be refused admission by stalwarts posted there expressly for that purpose.

It had been seen to by the management that Queensberry, whatever else he did that evening, should not enter the St. James's Theatre. The stall he originally booked had

at the last moment been cancelled, and the police warned that unless they prevented him from doing so, he was more than likely to cause a breach of the peace on a considerable scale.

For some time the enraged nobleman, accompanied as usual by a prize-fighter for companion, prowled about the vicinity, refusing to admit defeat. But the foul weather eventually proving too much even for his pugnacious spirit, he contented himself with leaving his vegetables at the stage-door, addressed to his enemy. After which he disappeared in the blizzard—chattering, it was affirmed by those who saw him, “like a monstrous ape”.

Meanwhile the author stood in the wings, complimenting the actors as they gathered round him on coming off the stage. To one with only a small part in the play, he said: “I’m so glad you got that laugh. It shows they have followed the plot.” To another: “I don’t think I shall take a call to-night. You see I took one only last month at the Haymarket, and one feels so much like a *German band*.” But to remain for too long hidden in the shadows became a strain, and during one of the intervals he paid a visit to his friend Ada Leverson’s box. With her were Aubrey Beardsley, the artist, and his sister Mabel, of whom Wilde, turning with a smile, remarked to their hostess: “What a contrast the two are! Mabel a daisy, Aubrey the most monstrous of orchids.”

Members of the audience who, happening to look up, caught sight of him as he chatted with his friends, saw the large, immaculately dressed figure for perhaps the last time. In his coat with its black-velvet collar he wore the green carnation that perfectly matched his scarab ring. From the expanse of his white waistcoat dangled, on a moiré ribbon, a large bunch of seals. “He looks,” thought Mrs. Leverson, “like the last gentleman in Europe.”

That the night had been for him a singular triumph, establishing beyond all doubt his position as the wittiest of playwrights, the papers next morning readily acknowledged. “Believe me,” wrote a critic, one not easily pleased, “it is

with no ironic intention that I declare Mr. Oscar Wilde to have 'found himself', at last, as an artist in sheer nonsense. . . . It is of nonsense all compact, and better nonsense, I think, our stage has not seen . . ."; a view shared, with few exceptions, by his colleagues.

An exception was Mr. Bernard Shaw, who on the second night found the play too unbelievable to be moving, and wasn't to be moved, even to laughter, by such improbable puppets as the author had devised: "It amused me, of course, but unless comedy touches me as well as amuses me, it leaves me with a sense of having wasted my evening."

Mr. Shaw was unaware as he wrote the words of how soon he was to be present at a discussion of the same author's private affairs, more likely to touch his generous heart, though lacking altogether the spirit of comedy. For he was to appear briefly in the prologue of the drama not long to be postponed, inspiration for which the Scarlet Marquess was already cudgelling his clouded brain.

Jaundiced though his outlook appeared to his victims, and intolerable his persecution of them, Queensberry nevertheless honestly believed himself to be the injured party; the husband, that is to say, of a wholly unreasonable wife, and the father of children he considered to be as wicked as they were insane. To his way of thinking, a parent had never before suffered such provocation at the hands of his family—an opinion more easily understood, perhaps, through a knowledge of the stock from which he had sprung, and the circumstances that governed his life.

Succeeding to the Marquisate on his father's death, he took charge, at the age of nineteen, of vast estates, and a fortune in the neighbourhood of £780,000.

To the Scottish aristocracy of his day he seemed a perfectly normal young man, and the pride he took in lacking any intellectual quality whatever, an asset upon which he had every right to congratulate himself. He could not help being the descendant of an ancient line of medieval Barons

whose instinct had for generations been to rule their families despotically. It was unfortunate, however, having regard to the sort of husband he was likely, on account of his ancestry, to develop into, that at the age of twenty he should have married the daughter of Sir Alfred Montgomery: a girl brought up in an entirely aesthetic atmosphere, and as devoted to the arts of music and literature as her husband was to his sporting activities. Her choice of Queensberry for a husband could hardly have been more disastrous.

Of her five children, the third to be born, Alfred Bruce Douglas—called always Bosie—took first place in her affections. An astonishingly beautiful child, she adored him. And if her other children were not neglected for his sake, they certainly never counted with her in the same way. Her husband ceased to count with her altogether. Their quarrels increasing as the years went by, a stage was reached when it became impossible for them to disguise their hatred of one another. From the first they had had not a single interest in common; and the husband's insulting behaviour—culminating in his wish that she should have his mistresses to live in the house—resulted in his wife divorcing him. After twenty years she could stand no more.

Reared in an atmosphere of dissension, it was to be expected that the children should take sides, and that the side they took should be their mother's. How could they not detest the man at whose hands she suffered such violent abuse, who went out of his way to heap ignominy upon her whenever possible. The only excuse for their father's infamous conduct—if indeed an excuse were needed!—was that he possessed a diseased mind. In their view he ought long ago to have been locked up in some place where he could do no harm.

Had Queensberry been familiar with King Lear's unfortunate situation he would undoubtedly have likened his own to it, making much of the 'serpent's tooth' line in the presence of his cronies. Discarded by the family, he was prevented from telling his wife and children to their faces what

ungrateful creatures they were, an omission he did his best to rectify by writing them abusive letters on the slightest provocation.

And of the provocation given him by his son Bosie's association with Wilde, he took the fullest advantage; pouring himself out in a series of spiteful communications to which they refused to reply; or, in Bosie's case, replied to with such studied insolence that he was beside himself with rage.

Having in the past almost entirely neglected his third son, Queensberry, from the moment he learned of his friendship with Wilde, adopted the role of a grieved parent—pointing out that the dramatist was no fit companion for him, and ordering the acquaintance to cease. The correspondence exchanged between father and son on this subject, acrimonious at first, grew violent in the extreme, resulting finally in each returning the other's letters unopened.

This was too much for Queensberry, in whose unbalanced mind the matter assumed alarming proportions; became, in fact, nothing less than an obsession. How dare a son of his even if he were of age to be his own master—bring disgrace upon the ancient name of Douglas by deliberately attaching himself to a man well known in certain circles for his disgusting vices. And how dared he, in defiance of his father's warnings, travel in that man's company to Algiers, to indulge there in heaven knew what filthy practices. That the man, on his return, should once more have fooled the public into accepting him as a brilliant genius, at whose feet it was their pleasure to pay homage, was the last straw.

Well, he had a duty too; one that, thank God, he wasn't afraid to discharge. His duty was to rescue that misguided, lily-livered son of his, and to expose to the world at large the odious blackguard who had polluted him. No father worthy of the name could do less. Whatever weapons he used in his war against Satan, even his own detractors must consider justified; and that Wilde was Satan incarnate no one who was half a Christian would have the face to deny.

Considering the ferocity of his intentions—he had pre-

viously threatened to horse-whip Bosie's traducer—the weapon Queensberry used for his final attack seemed strangely inadequate. It consisted of no more than a visiting-card on which he scribbled, with such impatience that one of them was misspelled, seven words.

Yet the weapon could scarcely have proved more effective.

Chapter Six

A YOUNG artist, Charles Ricketts, sat alone in the large room of a house in Beaufort Street, Chelsea. Bent over an engraver's block beneath the light of a single lamp, he wore an eyeshade fashioned like a visor, and was far too intent upon his work to notice how full the room was of fog. Hearing a loud knock at the front door, he put down his tools and went to answer it, thinking that the friend with whom he shared the studio, Charles Shannon, must have forgotten his key. But to his surprise and delight, on opening the door he saw looming out of the dank mist that swirled about the street, the tall, broad-shouldered figure of Oscar Wilde.

So long was it since he had seen Wilde, that he had come, regretfully, to look upon their acquaintance as quite a thing of the past; the perhaps inevitable consequence of changed circumstances. For a wide gulf separated those humble studio parties his friend had once been pleased to attend, from the smart social gatherings at which his presence, to judge from the newspapers, was now constantly in demand. In the last year or so the production of his plays had turned him from a none too prosperous author into the most successful dramatist of the day.

To know that Wilde's preoccupation with fame and fortune had not, after all, altered his essentially generous and kindly nature, Ricketts found most reassuring. Yet he was to realise, before his visitor had been in the room many minutes, that a change had indeed taken place. Wilde joked and laughed as he had always done. But not with the same spontaneous gaiety that had made his remarks so much more amusing to hear than anyone else's---giving them an air of insouciance which, when later he put them into his books, lost much of their effect. His mood seemed preoccupied and

somewhat distant; almost as if he were making the call from a sense of duty, and would be relieved when it was over. Which again was unlike him, for better than anyone, Ricketts recalled, his friend had been able to disguise whatever his real feelings were, simply by adopting a charm of manner that came naturally to him.

"My dear fellow," Wilde said, dismissing with a wave of the hand congratulations upon his most recent success, "it is *you* I want to hear about." He wandered restlessly to and fro, then paused to shake his head in some bewilderment: "But what a dreadfully dark place you live in now," he said. "You should never have left your enchanting abode in that leafy cul-de-sac off the King's Road. The Vale, wasn't it called? I have never forgotten your pretty rooms. Done in yellow, like my own. Buttercup yellow! The colour of joy! Tell me, why do you bury yourself in this large tomb?"

Lighting two candles, Ricketts explained the reason for the move. He was starting a small publishing venture, with the idea of bringing out new editions of some of the classic poets.

At once Wilde's interest was caught.

"Naturally you will publish the Sonnets," he said, his fine eyes glowing with enthusiasm. "One finds them always in such hideous editions, edited by men who handle Shakespeare as they would consols, or any other business investments. And of course," he added, "you must do my Portrait of Mr. W.H. As a frontispiece you can reproduce that fascinating picture of him you once made for me. I shall send it to you."

Mention of this picture, which had been the outcome of their very first meeting, brought back to Ricketts a vivid, endearing memory of that significant occasion. It must have been seven or eight years ago. He saw himself as little more than a youth, struggling to make his way as an illustrator and bookbinder; Wilde in his early thirties, a captivating personality, dazzlingly sophisticated and at the same time full of human kindness. He had come to the old studio at The Vale with a mutual friend, who had told him that

Ricketts was the very man he was looking for to illustrate the story he had written inspired by the mysterious Mr. W.H. to whom Shakespeare had dedicated the Sonnets.

Wilde had lost no time in acquainting him with his idea: "I have found from evidence in the Sonnets that Mr. W.H. was a young actor named Willie Hughes. Is that not a charming name? Now, I need a portrait, which I describe, as a frontispiece. You will see that a great deal depends on this."

Some days later Ricketts found himself a guest at Wilde's house in Tite Street, listening while he elaborated his theory. He remembered the small study off the hall in which they sat together, saw the pictures hanging on its yellow walls: a Monticelli, a Japanese print of children at play, a drawing by Simeon Solomon of Eros conversing with some youths dressed in fancy costumes. And he heard again Wilde's richly musical voice, reading verse after verse from the Shakespeare in his hand, lingering upon certain words that held for him an irresistible appeal: *narcissus*, *amber*, *crimson*. Finally he had looked up, and with a mischievous smile said: "Our English homes will totter to their base when my book appears, for which you *must* design a *wonderful* frontispiece."

In a letter of thanks for the small painting of Willie Hughes that Ricketts had sent him some days later, he had written: "I am really most grateful. No! that is a horrid word: I am never grateful. I am flattered and fascinated."

During the years that followed Wilde had lost no opportunity of helping his young friend by introducing his work to publishers, and made a point of always praising it in the right quarter. Which made it awkward for Ricketts at this moment to have to disappoint him. But in point of fact the small amount of capital at his disposal made the publication of any but classical poets too great a risk. He said as much; adding that once he had succeeded with Milton, Blake, Keats and one or two others, of course he would be pleased to bring out Wilde's book.

His excuse was none too graciously accepted; though Wilde did his best not to appear offended.

"I must work on the thing again," he said, reflectively, "it is still, I'm afraid, too short to be made into a book." He smiled: "But why do I say this? As if size meant anything. Think of the ocean—how dull! and of a pearl—which can be perfect." He paused, then said: "Have you noticed how annoyed pigs become if you do not cast pearls before them?"

It was useless Ricketts pretending that their relations were not a little strained; that they weren't uneasy in each other's company. He felt that he had been misunderstood; looked upon, even, as ungrateful. The conversation, what little there was of it, drifted into an exchange of trivialities which obviously interested neither of them. Suddenly Wilde made some excuse, and took his leave.

Left alone, poor Ricketts, unable to resume his work, fell to wondering what the cause of their seemingly mutual embarrassment might be. He would gladly have taken the blame himself. Yet he could not believe that Wilde hadn't, in some curious way, been responsible for the atmosphere of estrangement; their failure to recapture anything approaching the old intimacy. From the first he had worn an air of detachment, behaving like a man who tries unsuccessfully to prevent some secret worry from working its way to the surface of his mind.

Was it possible that he had troubles to contend with of which the outside world, to whom he appeared so blessed by good fortune, remained in ignorance? The vague stories that had reached him of his friend's reckless extravagance, and of a mania he was said to have for forming undesirable attachments, Ricketts had discounted as idle rumours, unworthy of serious consideration. Now he felt less sure. Not that if they were true it made any difference, except to awaken in him regret and concern—if indeed either was called for—on his friend's behalf.

To dispose of these gloomy reflections he half convinced

himself that his own imagination was their cause. Having always associated Wilde with the circumstances surrounding their first encounter; seen him, through the eyes of youth, as a gay figure shimmering in the sunshine, wonderfully vibrant with the sheer joy of life, his appearance in the mist, after so long an absence, had proved disenchanting by contrast. And his changed manner could easily be accounted for by nothing more permanent than a slight indisposition. A touch of indigestion was sufficient to upset a man's equilibrium, and he remembered hearing that Wilde now over-indulged himself at table to an alarming extent.

His musings were interrupted by the arrival of Shannon, who had just met Wilde in the King's Road: "He said he had been with you, discussing books and things."

"How did you think he looked?" Ricketts asked.

"Fatter, certainly. And a trifle preoccupied? But he was very amusing. As we were waiting in the fog for a cab to come along, he saw some sausage rolls and meat pies lit by gas in a shop window. 'What curious things people will sometimes eat!' he said, 'I suppose they must be hungry.' With that he hailed a hansom, climbed in, and waved good-bye."

Unaware of how ironic his remark about the comestibles in the shop window must one day seem, Wilde lay wearily back in the cab, his heavy-lidded eyes closed. He had told the driver to take him to the Albemarle Club, where he hoped that a stiff drink would help to revive his drooping spirits.

For some days he had felt depressed. His life--his charmed life as he was fond of calling it--that by all the rules should have afforded him days of unending pleasure and happiness, had let him down; exposing him to petty humiliations that no man in his position should be made to endure. The fog, of course, didn't help matters, reminding him by its hateful presence that really he ought not to be in London at all.

His intention had been to leave for Paris that very morn-

ing. But he was prevented at the last moment from doing so by the unreasonable proprietor of the Avondale Hotel. His bill there for the past ten days amounted to nearly £140, and they wouldn't let his luggage be removed until it was settled in full. It was his own fault, he supposed, considering the chaotic state of his finances, for inviting Bosie to stay as his guest; or rather for allowing him to invite himself, as he made a habit of doing. Certainly he had objected when Bosie brought along a friend of his own—an altogether impossible person—expecting *him* to be paid for too. Objected yes. But not stood firm. And now he was left alone, virtually a prisoner in the hotel, with expenses increasing all the time.

What an absurd situation! With two of his plays filling the theatre at every performance, managers beseeching him to write a new one, and his place in the very highest stratum of society assured, he was yet so heavily in debt that he scarcely knew which way to turn. The time had surely come to put his house in order. He owed it to his peace of mind—that tranquil state in which alone his genius could flower—to disentangle himself from the wretched complications which heedlessly he had allowed to encumber him. More than once before, in a moment of lucidity, he had promised himself this release from influences which in his heart he knew to be harmful. But this time he meant to keep his promise.

In the hall of the Albemarle Club, where he arrived at five o'clock, he was handed an envelope by the porter; which he discovered to contain a card bearing in Queensberry's shaky scrawl, the inscription: "To Oscar Wilde posing as a *somdomite*."

"When did this come?" he asked the man, who replied that the Marquess had handed it to him ten days previously, saying as he did so: "Give that to Oscar Wilde." Not understanding its meaning, he had put the card in an envelope for safe keeping. No one else, he said, had seen it.

Had Wilde torn up the card, treating it with the contempt he considered it deserved, his life might have followed a

very different course. And yet, since there is no knowing by what unforeseen path a man's fate approaches, nor by which of his many unpremeditated little actions he unconsciously sets in motion the machinery for his own destruction, he might equally well, in the event of his tearing it up, merely have postponed the scandal that for months had threatened to engulf him.

What in fact Wilde did was to return to his hotel and write a couple of letters: one to his friend Robert Ross, the other to Bosie. To the former he confided what had just occurred, adding that he believed the hideous words on the card left him no alternative but to prosecute his enemy for criminal libel. He begged Ross, if he would be so kind, to come to the hotel that night and discuss the matter.

Bosie, he asked to call the following morning, as early as possible.

And the following morning Mr. Charles Humphreys, a criminal lawyer of wide experience, faced across his desk three gentlemen in a state, more or less, of subdued agitation. None of them was a stranger to him. Some months previously young Mr. Robert Ross, already a client, had introduced his friend Mr. Oscar Wilde. And upon that occasion Lord Alfred Douglas had also been present. Not unnaturally, Mr. Humphreys concluded that these gentlemen had called to consult him on the same matter as before; the outcome of which had then been, he recollected, a letter sent to the Marquess of Queensberry demanding an apology for the libellous accusations he had made; which apology, however, had not been forthcoming.

Had Douglas had his way, they would not now have been sitting in Mr. Humphreys' office, but rather in the office of Sir George Lewis, the solicitor who usually looked after Wilde's affairs. But for once Douglas had not had his way. He had been overruled in the discussion which took place before they left the Avondale Hotel, where the three of them had foregathered shortly after breakfast.

"You cannot do better, Oscar," Ross had said, "than see Humphreys at once. I have implicit faith in his judgment."

"I have none whatever," said Douglas. "All he did last time was to send my father a letter, instead of at once having him arrested. If he'd done that my father's foul mouth would have been shut once and for all, and he wouldn't still be uttering his filthy lies."

In his gentle voice, Ross said: "You seem to forget, Bosie, that last time it was one of your own relatives who asked Oscar not to bring an action. He wanted to avoid a scandal in the family. Isn't that so, Oscar?"

But Wilde merely nodded, in a non-committal sort of way; and lit a fresh cigarette. The present was quite disturbing enough, he felt, without arguing over the past. Nor had he any wish, if he could help it, to take sides in a quarrel between his two friends that he knew could quite easily break out at any moment. If it did, the fault would be Bosie's—as usual. He was so impetuous. So infernally obstinate. So exactly the opposite of dear Robbie. . . . But then a sweeter, kinder, more loyal soul than Robert Ross had never breathed. Wilde had felt it, instinctively, from the day they had first met.

That the two young men had little regard for each other was very plain to see. Of much the same age, they could scarcely have differed more widely in appearance, or in temperament. Douglas's radiant beauty and air of well-bred insolence would have attracted attention anywhere. But Ross seemed almost pathetically anxious not to attract any attention at all.

He had left Cambridge at the end of a year without taking a degree, and lived quietly on an income of two hundred a year allowed him by his mother, which he supplemented by contributing essays on art and literature to the better-class periodicals. A dapper little person, he was once described as having the manner of an affectionate kitten. Which may not be a strong recommendation for a man. Neverthe-

less, he was the best and truest friend Wilde could have wished for. It was unfortunate therefore—as well as somewhat ironical—that his advice to his friend on this particular morning, when so much was at stake, should have been the wrong advice.

“I tell you,” Douglas persisted, “George Lewis is our man. He knows Oscar, and he also knows what a madman I’ve got for a father. There’s nobody to touch Lewis when it comes to handling a really important case. And God knows our case is important.”

“Oscar’s case, you mean,” said Ross, but hardly above a whisper.

The reason Douglas had eventually given up arguing was his anxiety to get on with the business before anyone changed his mind. He saw what a good chance there was of his hateful parent being arrested and publicly disgraced; which was something he had been looking forward to for years.

Mr. Humphreys, though outwardly he remained impassive, was inwardly a little surprised to learn the details of Queensberry’s latest move. Without question the Marquess had provided written evidence for a libel action against himself, which he must almost certainly lose if the writing on the card was proved to be his. And since he had delivered the card in person to the hall porter, there was no reason to suppose that he would deny it. Indeed, it was to be assumed that in the event of his being charged with the offence -- which might even be his intention—he would plead that the libel was true and that it was for the public benefit that it should be published.

“Mr. Wilde,” said the solicitor, looking his client straight in the eye, “have I your assurance before undertaking this case that there is no truth whatever in this libel?”

Wilde replied, solemnly, that there was none.

It was a perfectly proper question for Mr. Humphreys to put, since he was to prosecute on his client’s behalf, not to defend him. Yet the opinion was later expressed by those ‘in

the know' that in the same situation Sir George Lewis would tactfully have avoided the question altogether. Few of Society's indiscretions were unknown to Sir George, who knew also something of Wilde's background, to say nothing of the ugly rumours in circulation concerning him. His distinguished clientele had largely been built up on the reputation he had for deciding when a case was better settled out of court. And his advice to Wilde might well have been to destroy the Marquess's card, and to forget that he had ever received it.

"If you are innocent, you should succeed," said Mr. Humphreys; who then raised the matter of how costly proceedings against Queensberry were likely to be. Wilde made no attempt to hide the fact that he was unable to afford such gigantic expenses, at which point Bosie interposed:

"We have no need to worry about the costs," he said; "my family will be only too delighted to pay them."

Mr. Humphreys, to whom the situation was a little obscure, asked to be enlightened; and was thereupon informed by Bosie of what a menace to all of them, especially to his mother, the Marquess had been, and how frequently they had discussed together the possibility of getting him shut up in a lunatic asylum.

"If Mr. Wilde comes forward now and is instrumental in getting him put out of the way, he will be regarded by my family as their champion and benefactor. In fact," he added, with a great show of authority, "my mother's rich relations would look upon it as a positive pleasure to be allowed to pay the costs, no matter what they amount to."

The decision to act, however, rested with Wilde, towards whom Mr. Humphreys now turned for his approval. Was he prepared to come to the Police Court immediately, to apply for a warrant?

It was the question upon the answer to which everything depended. For a second Wilde hesitated, looking from one to the other of his friends, who appeared for once to be in

mutual agreement. On Bosie's account alone he might still have questioned the wisdom of taking this drastic step, aware of how bitterly prejudiced he was against his father. But Robbie had raised no objection; he had in fact very definitely given it as his opinion that not to prosecute Queensberry, was to encourage him. Robbie was no fool. Besides, he had the greatest integrity.

"I am ready, Mr. Humphreys, when you are," said Wilde, taking up his hat and cane.

Once the warrant had been executed, which it was the following day, events moved quickly. The preliminary proceedings at the Police Court provided nothing very sensational, introducing simply the leading characters in the drama that was later to be performed on the stage at the Old Bailey. All the same, the court was packed with those anxious to catch a glimpse of London's most fashionable dramatist accusing a famous sporting peer of damaging his good name.

So tremendous was the crush, that for some minutes even Wilde, who had arrived in a carriage and pair with the defendant's two sons, Lord Alfred Douglas and Lord Douglas of Hawick, could not be found a seat. And the defendant himself, whose presence inside the dock should have ensured space for one more outside it, added to the confusion by accepting the magistrate's invitation to leave it for a more dignified position beside his counsel.

If at this stage it could be said that a hint was given of the shape things were likely to take at a later date, and in a higher court, then perhaps it was to be found in Wilde's flippant manner as he commenced to give his evidence. And in Queensberry's calm answer to the magistrate's final question.

Mr. Humphreys—Are you a dramatist and author?

Wilde—I believe I am well known in that capacity.

Magistrate—Only answer the questions, please.

Upon Queensberry being asked whether, having heard the charge, he had anything to say in answer to it, he replied, rising to his feet :

"I have simply, your worship, to say this: I wrote that card simply with the intention of bringing matters to a head, having been unable to meet Mr. Wilde otherwise, and to save my son, and I abide by what I wrote."

The magistrate thereupon committed his lordship to the next Old Bailey sessions, which were due to open in under three week's time; and Wilde, accompanied by Bosie (injudiciously, it was thought by his friends), left a few days later for Monte Carlo.

That Wilde should have considered a spell of Mediterranean sunshine more necessary to his welfare than remaining in London for consultations with his solicitor, showed either how lightly he regarded the whole tedious business, or with what confidence he expected his case to succeed.

He might almost have forgotten one of his own best epigrams :

"A man cannot be too careful in the choice of his enemies."

Chapter Seven

THE news soon spread to the French Riviera, where those English visitors who could afford it came in droves to escape the harsh winter at home, that Oscar Wilde and young Lord Alfred Douglas were about to feature in a *cause célèbre* in London. And in Monte Carlo they were observed with interest, and some disapproval, whenever seen about together. Which certainly was not often. And those worldly spectators who muttered in undertones that the two men were lovers, must have been somewhat puzzled by the lack of any convincing evidence to prove them right.

A couple weary of each other's company after years of humdrum marriage could not have behaved more characteristically than Wilde and Douglas: the former seated on the terrace of the Casino reading a book to pass the time, while the latter, a feverish gambler, stayed all day in 'the rooms' playing baccarat. Nor at meal-times, when they met for a brief spell in the restaurant of their hotel, could their attitude be interpreted as anything beyond mutual toleration - -allowing even for a wish to disguise their true feelings. At the sight of Douglas's often sulky countenance, and Wilde's air of utter boredom, an onlooker might well have wondered what it could be that kept them together at all.

It was a question Wilde himself asked more than once, putting aside his book and looking wistfully down towards the sunlit harbour, or suddenly upwards into the vast expanse of blue sky. Wistfulness was not common to his nature, and it was only at such rare moments as he let his mind become introspective-- a habit he normally went out of his way to avoid--that a feeling of distress assailed him. It was a feeling of no great depth, and one he threw off lightly; yet while it lasted he was faced with facts whose explanation

totally eluded him, but for which he soon found an excuse; managing to persuade himself that it was the truth.

If he were not devoted to Bosie; then to whom had he ever been devoted? To his mother? To his wife? Each held a warm place in his heart, but by neither of them was his life influenced to any extent, since by neither of them were the innermost secrets of his life understood. Could it be, he asked himself, that lacking the grand passion which every man, more especially the artist, so ardently desires, he had unconsciously exaggerated his admiration for this golden youth; until it had become for him the symbol of an undying love? Or again—his thoughts ran on—could Bosie's affection for him be chiefly responsible for the survival of their friendship? He was sure that in his curious, erratic way Bosie was immensely fond of him. It was a fondness not always apparent, nor easy to bear; and one in response to which numerous concessions had to be made. All the same, he supposed it was something to be grateful for. Or would he have done better to rid himself entirely of Bosie's constant claims upon him; of his furious outbursts, his tearful recriminations, the altogether disastrous effect he had upon his peace of mind?

The conclusion Wilde for the moment reached concerning these matters—he was apt to reach a fresh one whenever his mind played upon this theme—was that for the time being his life had become so inextricably bound up with Bosie's that it would be wisest to convince himself that he adored his friend, and was by his friend adored. And if this attitude was prompted slightly by the satisfaction he got from flouting the conventions; from, as it were, throwing in the face of the community his contempt for its moral code, he may not have been more than vaguely aware of the fact.

A fact, however, of which at intervals he liked to remind himself, was that he could not possibly lose his case against Queensberry. Of this his solicitor, and also his counsel, Sir Edward Clarke, had practically assured him before he left London. And in the light of what knowledge they then

possessed, it seemed that their assurance was not unduly optimistic.

Queensberry had bitten off more than he could chew. He was expecting to prove his accusations on no more substantial evidence than a few poetic letters addressed to his son, copies of which had come into his hands. At the thought of how little these letters—whose contents must by now be ancient history to half London, so extensively had they been hawked around—could damage him, Wilde had to smile. And his smile was not for the ludicrous figure that he imagined the Scarlet Marquess would cut in the dock at the Old Bailey, but for the leading counsel engaged to defend him.

It was quite absurd to think of a man of Carson's prestige—Mr. Edward Carson, Q.C., M.P.—accepting a case whose flimsiness must have been sufficiently apparent to discourage men far less eminent from touching it. But what for Wilde added a distinct piquancy to the situation was that Carson had been a fellow student with him at Trinity College, Dublin; in the seventies. He was considered now to be one of the most formidable advocates of the day. Yet as a class-mate he could not be said to have shown marked ability in any direction. A plodder, Wilde would have called him; a man without charm or wit, who had had to sit up half the night with a damp towel round his head trying to acquire knowledge that seemed bent on eluding him. He was quite looking forward to the encounter; to scoring off this old acquaintance of his in court; as he could hardly help doing, things being as they were.

But what Wilde, idling in the sunshine of Monte Carlo, did not realise, was that things were no longer as they had been when he left London. At the time of his departure it would have been more or less true to say that he had no particular need to worry. But since then every hour of every day had been put to good use by Queensberry's legal advisers. The case for the defence had grown from strength to strength, until a mass of evidence was accumulated that noticeably raised the eyebrows, and compressed the lips, of

all who perused it. The muck-rakers had been at work. And to some purpose.

Normally the secrets of a man's sexual life go with him to the grave. It has been nobody's business to uncover them. But in the event of his pleasure being an offence against the law, he must dwell always in some danger. It becomes a duty to expose him. And especially was it the duty—as it was the livelihood—of those private detectives employed, on Queensberry's instructions, to ferret out what evidence there was of immoral practices indulged in by Wilde at various addresses, and over a considerable period.

But for all their ferreting in the seamier purlieus of the city, their cajoling and bribery of informers met with in gin-palaces and shady lodging-houses, the detectives discovered precious little that was of use to their employer. And it was from an altogether unexpected source that the information damaging to Wilde, of which they were pressingly in need, was received by Queensberry's solicitors. The man to whom they were obliged for this valuable service was an actor named Charles Brookfield, at present playing a small part in his enemy's play, *An Ideal Husband*, at the Haymarket Theatre. Why Mr. Brookfield should have nursed an enmity against the man in whose play he was appearing, was open to conjecture. One reason could have been that, as a writer of inferior plays himself, he was jealous of Wilde's brilliance. In any case, his hatred of the dramatist had become so strong an obsession that nothing afforded him keener enjoyment than doing whatever he could to harm him; a pursuit which the coming libel action conveniently encouraged.

No stone was left unturned by Brookfield in the course of his investigations, and from under one of them emerged a prostitute who declared her business to be seriously menaced by Wilde's disreputable male associates. Asked the whereabouts of her rivals, she gave the address of a certain Mr. Alfred Taylor; at whose house, she said, all the information needed should be available. And it was here that an Inspector Littlechild, pushing aside the indignant landlady who

strove in vain to keep him out, discovered not only a list of young males willing to trade their bodies, but also papers connecting some of them with Oscar Wilde. For the Defence this discovery amounted to nothing less than a treasure trove.

Immediately a plea of justification was filed on behalf of the defendant; consisting of a document, repetitiously worded, to the effect that 'our Lady the Queen' ought not to prosecute John Sholto Douglas Marquess of Queensberry, since the libel of which he stood accused, according to the natural meaning of the word thereof, was true in substance and in fact. To support this contention there followed details of improper acts said to have been committed on specific dates, at specific places, with specific persons, by Oscar Fingall O'Flahertie Wills Wilde. The dates mentioned in the plea went back two years or more, the places referred to varied from a room in a cheap lodging-house to a room in the Savoy Hotel; and the young persons concerned, mostly of humble origin, were named Alfred Wood, Charles Parker, Frederick Atkins, Sidney Mavor, and Edward Shelley.

It was a painstaking piece of excavation that Mr. Brookfield and numerous detectives had carried out in the city's underworld, one upon which they had every right to congratulate themselves.

Directly he returned from Monte Carlo, a consultation was held by his solicitors and counsel at which Wilde was shown the amended plea of justification.

"All of it is quite untrue," he said on reaching the last page, "I deny the accusations absolutely."

Of the unpleasant shock it must have been to him to discover how much of his private life had come to light, he gave no outward sign whatever. His counsel was the one who looked perturbed. Sir Edward Clarke, at their first meeting, had said: "I can only accept this brief, Mr. Wilde, if you can assure me on your honour as an English gentleman that there is not and never has been any foundation for the charges that are made against you." Sir Edward had

overlooked the fact that his client was an Irishman. As indeed the client himself may have done when he reaffirmed his innocence.

Apart from Douglas, whose chief concern was to be revenged upon his father, none of Wilde's friends wanted him to continue with the case. They had already heard enough of what was going on behind the scenes—Brookfield and others had spread news of their discoveries all over town—to be afraid of the outcome. But their entreaties met with little response from Wilde, who seemed to be amused rather than impressed by their concern for him, which he dismissed with an airy gesture of the hand; as if he considered their alarm entirely unjustified, if not a trifle tedious.

Two days before the opening of the case at the Old Bailey he sat with his wife and Douglas in a box at the St. James's Theatre, where *The Importance of Being Earnest* was crowded at every performance. George Alexander, to whose dressing-room he went round between the acts, suggested, as tactfully as he could, that his visit at this time might be considered by the audience to be in bad taste.

Wilde thought the idea utterly ridiculous.

"My dear Alec," he said, "you might as well accuse the audience of bad taste for coming to see my play at this time. What nonsense! I should only think it had bad taste if it went to see someone else's play."

It was said with a laugh that sounded in no way forced, and looking at this man who seemed untouched by the seriousness of his position, who was either blind to its possible consequences, or reckless to the point of insanity, Alexander said to him:

"Oscar, may I give you a piece of advice?"

"If you must, Alec."

"Will you take it if I do?"

"I always take advice if it appeals to me."

"Then give up this case against Queensberry and go abroad. Now will you do that, for your own sake?"

The advice was given with the utmost seriousness, but

Wilde could not bring himself to treat it in that vein. He had to dismiss it with a laugh:

"My friends all want me to go abroad," he said. "I have just been abroad, and now I have come home again. One cannot keep on going abroad, unless one is a missionary, or, what comes to the same thing, a commercial traveller."

Another friend who wished him to cross the Channel immediately was Frank Harris. In his forthright manner the journalist practically ordered him to leave the country, having first pointed out to him that he had not an earthly hope of winning his case against Queensberry. Present on this occasion, which took place at the Café Royal, was red-bearded Bernard Shaw; the dramatic critic of *The Saturday Review*, with his great reputation as yet unmade.

The evening before this meeting—which had he but known of it the right artist could have immortalised on canvas as a 'conversation piece' in front of which people would have gaped in wonder for generations to come—Wilde had sought Harris's help. Would he, in his position as a distinguished editor, come into court and give evidence? Asked what evidence he was expected to give, Harris was told how tremendously helpful it would be if he were to say that nothing in Wilde's writings, his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* for instance, was immoral.

Harris could not have received an invitation he liked better. As an authority on literature—an authority on most things, in his own estimation—he fancied himself in the witness-box denouncing those who dared in their ignorance, or because they were prudes, to impute immoral motives to his friend's unquestionably moral book. Never one to do things by halves, he declared:

"I would do more than that, Oscar. I would say that I have never known a man whose talk, like his work, is more free from suggestiveness of any sort."

"How good of you, Frank. The solicitors tell me that the Defence is hoping to prejudice my case by quoting certain passages from my books. However, they are certain I shall

win. Your support, they assure me, will make all the difference."

But if Harris was a braggart, he was no fool. And from what Wilde, whom he genuinely admired and liked, had led him to assume about his private life, as well as from what he himself had since learned from various reliable sources, he doubted if all his friend had to fear in court was an attack on his writings.

"I must tell you, Oscar," he said, "that although there is nothing I would not do to help you, you are making a fatal mistake in bringing this case at all. In fact you must drop it, at once."

"How can I, Frank?"

"But you must, since you cannot hope to win it."

"What do you mean by that?"

Their argument ended by Harris imploring Wilde to think the matter over and to meet him again the following day. Bernard Shaw was lunching with him at the Café Royal, he said; but as Shaw usually left early there was no reason why Wilde should not come along at about three o'clock, when they could discuss the matter again.

As it happened, Bernard Shaw was still chatting over the luncheon table when Wilde came into the restaurant, accompanied by Douglas. At once he rose to take his leave, but Wilde insisted upon his remaining. Already acquainted with Shaw, he had no objection to his presence at the renewed discussion he had come to have with Harris.

In a resonant voice, and at a speed which made interruption difficult, Harris gave his verdict: which was that the jury's verdict, should Wilde be misguided enough not to withdraw from the case and leave the country, would be in Queensberry's favour.

A vague protest on Wilde's part to the effect that something must be done to shut the madman's mouth, and an interruption from Douglas on the subject of his father's evil intentions, was silenced by Harris; who knew full well what he was talking about, and was determined to be heard. He

held forth as if he were addressing a meeting, the burden of his speech being that no English jury would convict a father who pleaded that he was trying to protect his son; no matter what sort of monster, or how much of a hypocrite, that father might be.

"Make no mistake, Oscar," said Harris, pointing his cigar at him, "the Defence has collected enough evidence to damn you from the start. The highest testimonials to your work, no matter from whom they come, will be of not the slightest use to you."

"Frank, what dreadful things you say!" That Wilde was worried was apparent; but equally apparent was his boredom with the whole business. His manner was far from being that of a man about to face the biggest crisis of his life.

"What you must do," said Harris, "is to take your wife abroad with you, and remain out of the country for some time, until the scandal has blown over. And first you should write a letter to *The Times*. In it you can say that you have changed your mind; that you are not a fighter but an artist; and that you have no intention of coming between father and son."

This was too much for Douglas. He saw that his hopes of revenge would come to nothing if Oscar gave in. This vulgar journalist was taking too much upon himself; behaving, in fact, as if he were a social equal. His idiotic tongue had better be silenced.

"From what you are saying," he cried, standing up and glaring at Harris, "one thing is perfectly clear: you are no friend of Oscar's!"

In a fury he walked out of the place, leaving the others speechless with surprise.

Wilde was the first to find his voice.

"Bosie is right, you know," he said. "It is ungenerous of you, Frank. I thought you were on my side."

He followed Douglas out: walking with his accustomed dignity, his head thrown back a little, his face a mask.

"Did I," asked Harris, turning to Shaw in some perplexity, "say anything to which Oscar could possibly have taken exception?"

"Nothing whatever, Frank," said Shaw.

So many reasons could have been put forward at that moment to explain Wilde's seemingly futile conduct. But only that which took into account his singular state of mind at the time was likely to come anywhere near the truth. For it was not a failure on his part to gauge the force of public opinion that counted, so much as the belief he had in his own omnipotence. He was by day the King of Life that once he had dreamed at nights of becoming. Of where fantasy ended and reality began, he had now lost all sense.

Indeed he was sufficiently enamoured of himself to overlook the fact that not everyone shared his point of view.

Chapter Eight

MORE dramatic by far than most plays acted in a theatre are the dramas of real life that from day to day unfold themselves before a judge and jury at the Old Bailey. And of these it is doubtful if any has ever equalled in the brilliance of its dialogue, or in the sheer technique of its performance, that which opened there on 3rd April, 1895.

For at least an hour before the proceedings were due to commence the public seats had been filled with eager spectators. It goes without saying that among them was a wag of the type who since time immemorial has sought to enliven his companions, which in this instance he did by facetiously remarking upon 'the importance of being early'. He raised the first of many laughs that were to be heard in court during the three days trial, for like all good drama the one about to be presented was spiced with 'comedy relief' of the very highest order.

Of the actors, the first to arrive in the gloomy court was Queensberry. Morosely, hat in hand, he stood in front of the dock; looking, with his red whiskers, and a blue stock in place of a collar, more like one of his own game-keepers than an aristocrat. Soon afterwards, within a few minutes of one another, came the two chief protagonists; the star performers whose conflict was to provide the day's entertainment: Mr. Oscar Wilde and Mr. Edward Carson.

If Carson was aware of the smile Wilde gave him, he ignored it. Classmates at Trinity they might once have been, but this was no time to acknowledge the fact. And Carson may even have wondered, as he watched Wilde out of the corner of his eye, what effect his proposed cross-examination, to say nothing of the string of witnesses he intended to produce, was likely to have on the smartly attired, plump

dramatist, whose hair was so beautifully waved. It would take some standing up to. But then of course it was said—by those even whose word could be relied upon—that in an argument Wilde was no fool either.

The supporting members of the cast were not all of them visible, though Sir Edward Clarke was to be seen in animated conversation with his client, who shortly he would be presenting to the jury as the innocent victim of an insane persecution by Lord Queensberry. Also present, and in earnest conference with his employers, was Inspector Littlechild, upon whose cunningly assembled evidence, scraped from the lowest rungs of the social ladder, the defendant was expecting to win his plea of justification.

At the moment 'the evidence' was heartily enjoying itself, exulting in the novel experience of having its cake and eating it. Zealously guarded in another room, it smoked, spat, exchanged ribaldries, and laughed; mightily tickled at the idea of being paid twice over for its unlawful acts: once by Mr. Wilde for committing them, and again by Mr. Wilde's detractors for confessing that they had been committed. As 'gentlemen of the chorus' these unsavoury lads had only minor rôles to play, yet the lines given them to repeat in the witness-box had the awful significance of those chanted by messengers of doom in a Greek tragedy.

Bewhiskered, bushy-eyebrowed Sir Edward Clarke—who may not have had the forceful presence of his learned friend, Mr. Edward Carson, but who nevertheless was one of the cleverest advocates of his day—had begun his opening speech for the prosecution within a few minutes of the judge taking his seat on the bench:

You have heard the charge against the defendant (he said) which is that he published a false and malicious libel in regard to Mr. Oscar Wilde. That libel was published in the form of a card left by Lord Queensberry at a club to which Mr. Oscar Wilde belonged. On that card his lordship wrote: "Oscar Wilde posing as a sodomite." The words of

the libel are not directly an accusation of the gravest of all offences—the suggestion is that there was no guilt of the actual offence, but that in some way or other the person of whom those words were written did appear—nay, desired to appear—and pose to be a person guilty of or inclined to the commission of the gravest of all offences.

But the matter does not stop at the question of whether that card was delivered, or whether the defendant can in any way be excused by strong feeling—mistaken feeling—for having made that statement. By the plea which the defendant has brought before the court a much graver issue has been raised. The plea has not been read to you gentlemen. There is no allegation in the plea that Mr. Oscar Wilde has been guilty of the offence of which I have spoken, but there is a series of accusations in it mentioning the names of persons, and it is said with regard to those persons that Mr. Wilde solicited them to commit with him the grave offence, and that he has been guilty with each and all of them of indecent practices. It is for those who have taken the responsibility of putting into the plea those serious allegations to satisfy you, gentlemen, if they can, by credible witnesses, or evidence which they think worthy of consideration and entitled to belief, that these allegations are true.

Mr. Oscar Wilde is a gentleman, thirty-eight years of age, the son of Sir William Wilde, a very distinguished Irish surgeon and oculist. Sir William Wilde died some years ago, but Lady Wilde is still living. Mr. Oscar Wilde went in the first instance to Trinity College, Dublin, where he greatly distinguished himself for classical knowledge. His father wished him to go to Oxford, and he went to Magdalen College, Oxford, where he had a brilliant career, obtaining the Newdigate Prize for English poetry. After leaving the University he devoted himself to literature in its artistic side. Many years ago he became a very prominent personality, laughed at by some but appreciated by many, representing a form of artistic literature which recommended itself to many of the foremost minds and most cultivated people. In 1884

he had the good fortune to marry a daughter of the late Mr. Horace Lloyd, Q.C., and from that day to the present he has lived with his wife, who has borne him two children, at Tite Street, Chelsea. Among the friends who went to his house in Tite Street was Lord Alfred Douglas, a younger son of Lord Queensberry.

Between 1892 and 1894, Mr. Wilde became aware that certain statements were being made against his character. A man named Allen called on Mr. Wilde, and said that he possessed a letter which Mr. Wilde had written to Lord Alfred Douglas, and asked Mr. Wilde to give him something for it. Mr. Wilde absolutely and peremptorily refused. He sent Allen away, giving him ten shillings for himself. Almost immediately afterwards a man named Cliburn came to Mr. Wilde and said that Allen had appreciated Mr. Wilde's kindness so much that he sent back the letter. The man then handed over the letter, and Mr. Wilde gave him half-a-sovereign for his trouble.

Mr. Wilde looks upon this letter as a sort of prose poem. Here it is :

My Own Boy,

Your sonnet is quite lovely, and it is a marvel that those red rose-leaf lips of yours should have been made no less for the music of song than for madness of kisses. Your slim gilt soul walks between passion and poetry. I know Hyacinthus, whom Apollo loved so madly, was you in Greek days.

Why are you alone in London, and when do you go to Salisbury? Do go there to cool your hand in the grey twilight of Gothic things, and come here whenever you like. It is a lovely place—it only lacks you; but go to Salisbury first.

Always, with undying love,

Yours,

Oscar.

The words of that letter, gentlemen, may appear extravagant to those in the habit of writing commercial correspondence, or those ordinary letters which the necessities of life

force upon one every day; but Mr. Wilde is a poet, and the letter is considered by him as a prose sonnet, and one of which he is in no way ashamed and is prepared to produce anywhere as the expression of true poetic feeling, and with no relation whatever to the hateful and repulsive suggestion put to it in the plea in this case.

There are two counts at the end of the plea which are extremely curious. It is said that Mr. Wilde has published a certain indecent and immoral work with the title of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. And, secondly, that in December 1894, was published a certain immoral work in the form of *The Chameleon*, relating to the practices of persons of unnatural habits; and that Mr. Wilde had contributed to it under the title of "Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young". These are two very gross allegations. Directly Mr. Wilde saw a story in *The Chameleon*, called "The Priest and the Acolyte", he communicated with the editor, and upon Mr. Wilde's insistence the magazine was withdrawn. The volume called *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is one that can be bought on any bookstall in London. It has Mr. Wilde's name on the title-page and has been published five years. I shall be surprised if my learned friend can pitch upon any passage in that book which does more than describe as novelists and dramatists may—nay, must—describe the passions and fashions of life.

At this point Wilde entered the witness-box to be cross-examined by his counsel. His manner as he answered the questions put to him by Sir Edward was all it should have been. If he looked, in his fashionable clothes and with his gay buttonhole, a little like a professional actor, he had not yet begun to behave like one.

How old are you?—Thirty-nine.

In 1891 did you make the acquaintance of Lord Alfred Douglas?—Yes; he was brought to my house by a friend. Before then I had been acquainted with Lady Queensberry,

but since then I have been a guest in her house many times. I also knew Lord Douglas of Hawick. Lord Alfred has dined with me from time to time at my house and at the Albemarle Club, of which my wife is a member, and has stayed with us at Cromer, Goring, Worthing, and Torquay.

When did you meet Lord Queensberry? —In November 1892.

When did you see him again? —In 1894. On both occasions I was lunching at the Café Royal, when Lord Queensberry joined us.

Shortly after the second meeting, did you become aware that he was making suggestions with regard to your character and behaviour? —Yes. At the end of June, 1894, there was an interview between Lord Queensberry and myself at my house. He called upon me, not by appointment, about four o'clock in the afternoon. The interview took place in my library. Lord Queensberry was standing by the window. I walked over to the fireplace and he said to me, "Sit down." I said to him, "I do not allow anyone to talk like that to me in my house or anywhere else. I suppose you have come to apologise for the statements you have been making about me." Lord Queensberry repeated several lies he had heard about Lord Alfred Douglas and myself. He said, "I hear you were thoroughly well blackmailed for a disgusting letter you wrote to my son." I said, "The letter was a beautiful letter, and I never write except for publication." Then I asked: "Lord Queensberry, do you seriously accuse your son and me of improper conduct?" He said, "I do not say you are it, but you look it, and you pose as it, which is just as bad." Then I told Lord Queensberry to leave my house.

Before you sent your contribution to *The Chameleon*, had you anything to do with the preparation or publication of that magazine? —Nothing whatever.

Did you approve of the story "The Priest and the Acolyte"? —I thought it bad and indecent, and I strongly disapproved of it.

Your attention has been called to the plea and to the

names of the persons with whom your conduct is impugned. Is there any truth in these allegations?—There is no truth whatever in any one of them.

Cross-examination by his own counsel is no incentive to a witness to prove his mettle. Knowing the answers in which he has been carefully rehearsed, it is difficult for him not to repeat them with an assurance amounting to smugness. But to face with as much poise and self-confidence the opposition, whose unknown questions may descend upon him out of the blue like a shower of poisoned arrows, a man of parts is required. And such a man Wilde certainly proved himself to be that April morning, when he not merely withstood the attack, but ridiculed it. In effect it was as if the arrows which sought to pierce his armour had been no more than prickly burs to be lightly flicked from his coat-sleeve. And yet, undoubtedly, the opening round in that great forensic battle went to Mr. Edward Carson, who remarked, with deceptive smoothness:

You stated that your age was thirty-nine. I think you are over forty. You were born on 16th October, 1854?—I have no wish to pose as being young. I am thirty-nine or forty. You have my certificate and that settles the matter.

But being born in 1854 makes you more than forty?—Ah! Very well.

How old was Lord Alfred Douglas when you first knew him?—Between twenty and twenty-one years of age.

There were two poems by Lord Alfred Douglas in *The Chamberlain* in which your article appeared?—Yes. I thought them exceedingly beautiful poems. One was “In Praise of Shame” and the other “Two Loves”.

These loves. They were two boys?—Yes.

One boy called his love “true love”, and the other boy called his love “shame”?—Yes.

Did you think they made any improper suggestion?—No, none whatever.

You read "The Priest and the Acolyte"?—Yes.

You have no doubt that that was an immoral story?—It was worse, it was badly written.

Wasn't the story that of an acolyte who was discovered by the rector in the priest's room, and a scandal arose?—I have read it only once and nothing would induce me to read it again.

Do you think the story blasphemous?—I think it violated every artistic canon of beauty.

That is not an answer.—It is the only one I can give.

I want to see the position you pose in.—I do not think you should say that.

I have said nothing out of the way. I wish to know whether you thought the story blasphemous?—The story filled me with disgust. The end was wrong.

Answer the question, sir. Did you or did you not consider the story blasphemous?—I did not consider the story blasphemous. I thought it disgusting.

I am satisfied with that. So far as your own works are concerned, you pose as not being concerned with morality or immorality?—I do not know whether you use the word "pose" in any particular sense.

It is a favourite word of your own?—Is it? I have no pose in this matter. In writing a play or a book, I am concerned entirely with literature—that is, with art. I aim, not at doing good or evil, but in trying to make a thing that will have some quality of beauty.

Listen, sir. Here is one of the "Phrases and Philosophies for the use of the Young", which you contributed to *The Chameleon*: "Wickedness is a myth invented by good people to account for the curious attractiveness of others". You think that is true?—I rarely think that anything I write is true.

Did you say "rarely"?—I said "rarely". I might have said "never".

"Religions die when they are proved to be true." Do you think that was a safe axiom to put forward for the philosophy of the young?—Most stimulating.

"If one tells the truth, one is sure, sooner or later, to be found out"?—That is a pleasing paradox, but I do not set very high store on it as an axiom.

Is it good for the young?—Anything is good that stimulates thought at whatever age.

Whether moral or immoral?—There is no such thing as morality or immorality in thought. There is immoral emotion.

"Pleasure is the only thing one should live for"?—I think that the realisation of oneself is the prime aim of life, and to realise oneself through pleasure is finer than to do so through pain. I am, on that point, entirely on the side of the ancients--the Greeks. It is a pagan idea.

"There is something tragic about the enormous number of young men there are in England at the present moment who start life with perfect profiles, and end by adopting some useful profession"?—I should think that the young have enough sense of humour.

You think that is humorous?—I think it is an amusing paradox, an amusing play upon words.

This is in your introduction to *Dorian Gray*: "There is no such thing as a moral or immoral book. Books are well written or badly written." That expresses your view?—My view on art, yes.

Then a well-written book putting forward perverted moral views may be a good book?—No work of art ever put forward views. Views belong to people who are not artists.

A perverted novel might be a good book?—I don't know what you mean by a "perverted" novel.

Then I will suggest *Dorian Gray* as open to the interpretation of being such a novel?—That could only be to brutes and illiterates. The views of Philistines on art are incalculably stupid.

An illiterate person reading *Dorian Gray* might consider it such a novel?—The views of illiterates on art are unaccountable. I am concerned only with my view of art. I don't care twopence what other people think of it.

The majority of persons would come under your definition of Philistines and illiterates?—I have found wonderful exceptions.

Do you think that the majority of people live up to the position you are giving us?—I am afraid they are not cultivated enough.

Not cultivated enough to draw the distinction between a good book and a bad book?—Certainly not.

The affection and love of the artist of *Dorian Gray* might lead an ordinary individual to believe that it might have a certain tendency?—I have no knowledge of the views of ordinary individuals.

You did not prevent the ordinary individual from buying your book?—I have never discouraged him.

Here is a passage from the book. The artist is speaking to Dorian Gray: "From the moment I met you, your personality had the most extraordinary influence over me. I quite admit that I adored you madly." Have you ever adored a young man madly?—No, not madly: I prefer love—that is a higher form.

Never mind that. Let us keep down to the level we are at now?—I have never given adoration to anybody but myself.

I suppose you think that a very smart thing?—Not at all.

Then you have never had that feeling?—No. The whole idea was borrowed from Shakespeare, I regret to say—yes, from Shakespeare's sonnets.

"I have adored you extravagantly"?—Do you mean financially?

Oh, yes, financially. Do you think we are talking about finance?—I don't know what you are talking about.

Don't you? Well, I hope I shall make myself very plain before I have done.

Chapter Nine

MR. CARSON'S hope that he would make himself very plain before he had done, he expressed late in the afternoon, as the first day of Queensberry's trial neared its end. It was an ominous remark, but since what lay behind it was as yet hidden from him, the prosecutor was in no way discountenanced by it. Indeed, so far, Wilde had more than held his own. These lengthy references to his works and to his letters, no matter what curious interpretation was put upon them, were no proof that he posed as anything more dangerous to the community than an artist with bizarre opinions. If the truth were known, he was rather enjoying himself. On more than one occasion he thought he had sensed, as the theatrical phrase went, 'that the house was with him'; at least to the extent of encouraging him to continue with the game of scoring off his old classmate.

Mr. Carson resumed :

Where was Lord Alfred Douglas staying when you wrote that letter that my learned friend read in court just now?—At the Savoy; and I was at Babbacombe, near Torquay.

It was a letter in answer to something he had sent you?

Yes, a poem.

Why should a man of your age address a boy twenty years younger as "My own Boy"?—I was fond of him. I have always been fond of him.

Did you adore him?—No, but I have always liked him. I think it is a beautiful letter. It is a poem. I was not writing an ordinary letter. You might as well cross-examine me as to whether *King Lear* or a sonnet of Shakespeare was proper.

Suppose a man who was not an artist had written that

letter, would you say it was a proper letter?—A man who was not an artist could not have written that letter.

I can suggest, for the sake of your reputation, that there is nothing very wonderful in this “red rose-leaf lips” of yours.—A great deal depends on the way it is read.

“Your slim gilt soul walks between passion and poetry.” Is that a beautiful phrase?—Not as you read it, Mr. Carson. You read it very badly.

I do not profess to be an artist: and when I hear you give evidence, I am glad I am not.

Here Sir Edward Clarke rose to his feet and addressed Mr. Carson: “I don’t think my friend should talk like that.” He added, turning to Wilde: “Pray, do not criticise my friend’s reading again.” Mr. Carson, as if he had not heard the rebuke, which after all was no more than a matter of form, continued:

Is not that an exceptional letter?—It is unique, I should say.

Have you often written letters in the same style as this?—I don’t repeat myself in style.

Here is another letter which I believe you wrote to Lord Alfred Douglas. Will you read it?—No; I decline. I don’t see why I should.

Then I will.

Savoy Hotel.

Dearest of all boys,

Your letter was delightful, red and yellow wine to me; but I am sad and out of sorts. Bosie, you must not make scenes with me. They kill me, they wreck the loveliness of life. I cannot see you, so Greek and gracious, distorted with passion. I cannot listen to your curved lips saying hideous things to me. . . . I must see you soon. You are the divine thing I want, the thing of grace and beauty; but I don’t know how to do it. Shall I come to Salisbury? My bill here

is £49 for a week. I have also got a new sitting-room . . . Why are you not here, my dear, my wonderful boy? I fear I must leave—no money, no credit, and a heart of lead.

Your own Oscar.

Is that an ordinary letter?—Everything I write is extraordinary. I do not pose as being ordinary, great heavens! Ask me any question you like about it.

Is it the kind of letter a man writes to another?—It was a tender expression of my great admiration for Lord Alfred Douglas. It was not, like the other, a prose poem.

How long had you known Wood?—I think I met him at the end of January, 1893.

Who was Wood?—So far as I could make out he had no occupation, but was looking for a situation.

Then do I understand that the first time you met Wood you took him to supper?—Yes, because I had been asked to be kind to him. Otherwise he was rather a bore.

Had you a private room at the Florence?—Yes.

How much did you give Wood then?—£2.

Why?—Because I had been asked to be kind to him.

I suggest that you first had immoral relations with him and then gave him money?—It is perfectly untrue.

Did you consider he had come to levy blackmail?—I did; and I determined to face it.

And the way you faced it was by giving him £15 to go to America?—That is an inaccurate description. I saw that the letters were of no value, and I gave him the money after he had told me the pitiful tale about himself, foolishly perhaps, but out of pure kindness.

Had you a farewell lunch at the Florence?—Yes.

Did Wood call you Oscar?—Yes.

What did you call Wood?—His name is Alfred.

Didn't you call him "Alf"?—No, I never use abbreviations.

Did you not think it a curious thing that a man with whom you were on such intimate terms should try to black-

mail you?—I thought it infamous, but Wood convinced me that such had not been his intention, though it was the intention of other people. Wood assured me that he had recovered all the letters.

And then Allen came with a letter, possession of which you knew he had secured improperly?—Yes.

What was Allen?—I am told he was a blackmailer.

Then you began to explain to the blackmailer what a loss your beautiful letter was?—I described it as a beautiful work of art.

May I ask why you gave this man, who you knew was a notorious blackmailer, ten shillings?—I gave it out of contempt.

Then the way you show your contempt is by paying ten shillings?—Yes, very often.

I suppose he was pleased with your contempt?—Yes, he was apparently pleased at my kindness.

At that time were Messrs. Elkin Mathews and John Lane, of Vigo Street, your publishers?—Yes.

Did you become fond of their office boy?—I really do not think that is the proper form for the question to be addressed to me in. I deny that that was the position held by Mr. Edward Shelley, to whom you are referring. I object to your description.

What age was Mr. Shelley?—I should think about twenty. I met him when arranging for the publication of my books.

Did you ask him to dine with you at the Albemarle Hotel?—Yes.

Was that for the purpose of having an intellectual treat?—Well, for him, yes.

On that occasion did you have a room leading into a bedroom?—Yes.

Did you give him whiskies and sodas?—I suppose he had whatever he wanted.

Did you become intimate with a young man named Alphonse Conway at Worthing?—Yes.

He sold newspapers at a kiosk on the pier?—It is the first I have heard of his connection with literature.

What was he?—He led a happy, idle life.

Were you fond of this boy?—Naturally. He had been my companion for six weeks.

Did you take the lad to Brighton?—Yes.

And provided him with a suit of blue serge?—Yes.

And a straw hat with a band of red and blue?—That, I think, was his own unfortunate selection.

But you paid for it?—Yes.

You dressed this newsboy up to take him to Brighton?—No. I did not want him to be ashamed of his shabby clothes.

In order that he might look more like an equal?—Oh, no! He could not look like that. No, I promised him that before I left Worthing I would take him somewhere, to some place to which he wished to go, as a reward for being a pleasant companion to myself and my children. We dined at a restaurant and stayed the night at the Albion Hotel, where I took a sitting-room and two bedrooms.

Have you been to afternoon tea-parties at Alfred Taylor's rooms in Little College Street?—Certainly.

Did you get Taylor to arrange dinners at which you could meet young men?—No.

But you have dined with young men?—Often.

Always in a private room?—Generally, I prefer it.

Now, did you know that Taylor was notorious for introducing young men to older men?—I never heard that in my life. He has introduced young men to me.

How many?—About five.

Have you given money to them?—Yes, I think to all five money and presents.

Did they give you anything?—Me? Me? No!

Among these five, did Taylor introduce you to Charles Parker?—Yes.

You became friendly with him?—Yes, he was one with whom I became friendly.

Did you know that Parker was a gentleman's servant out of employment?—No.

But if he were, you would still have become friendly with him?—Yes. I would become friendly with any human being I liked.

How old was he?—Really, I do not keep a census.

Never mind about a census. Tell me how old he was.—I should say he was about twenty. He was young and that was one of his attractions.

Where is he now?—I haven't the slightest idea. I have lost sight of him.

How much money did you give Parker?—During the time I have known him, I should think £4 or £5.

Why? For what reason?—Because he was poor and I liked him. What better reason could I have?

Did you become friendly with Parker's brother?—Yes.

Did you invite Parker and his brother to dinner?—Yes.

Did you know that one Parker was a groom, and the other a gentleman's valet?—I did not know it, but if I had I should not have cared. I didn't care twopence what they were. I liked them. I have a passion to civilise the community.

What enjoyment was it to you to entertain grooms and coachmen?—The pleasure to me was being with those who are young, bright, happy, careless, and free. I do not like the sensible and I do not like the old.

What did you have for dinner?—Well, I really forget the menu.

Was it a good dinner?—Kettner's is not so gorgeous as some restaurants, but it was Kettner at his best.

You had wine?—Of course.

Was there plenty of champagne?—Well, I did not press wine upon them.

You did not stint them?—What gentleman would stint his guests?

What gentleman would stint the valet and the groom? Do you drink iced champagne yourself?—Yes; iced cham-

pagne is a favourite drink of mine—strictly against my doctor's orders.

Never mind about your doctor's orders, sir.—I never do.

Did you write Charles Parker any beautiful letters?—I don't think I have ever written any letters to him.

Have you any letters of his?—Only one.

You received this letter from Parker: "Am I to have the pleasure of dining with you this evening? If so, kindly reply by messenger or wire to the above address. I trust you can, and we can spend a pleasant evening." The letter is signed "Yours faithfully."

Sir Edward Clarke, as Mr. Carson finished reading the letter from Charles Parker, said: "I should like to see the handwriting." To which Mr. Carson replied: "We will see all about that. Parker himself will be here, which is better."

It was a sensational statement, whose effect was not lost upon a single person in that crowded court. So these lads, to whom Wilde admitted giving money and presents and receiving nothing in return; these unemployed youngsters who had enjoyed the dramatist's lavish hospitality, would soon be standing where their host now stood, to give on oath their own version of what actually had taken place on these festive occasions. Small wonder that Sir Edward's mind was made uneasy by the suspicion he could no longer avoid that his client, contrary to the assurance he had previously given him of his innocence, was in fact guilty of a graver offence even than that of which Queensberry accused him. Nor were matters improved during the course of the morning, when, before the luncheon interval was reached, the implacable Mr. Carson, owing entirely to a slip of the tongue on Wilde's part, was gratuitously presented with an advantage which he was quick to follow up.

It was a slip made as the result of Wilde's inability, serious as his position was, to refrain from playing to the gallery. Had he answered the questions quite simply he might have served himself better. But to do so would have

been entirely out of character. Then, too, so many questions had by this time been put to him concerning different boys, that the recital was beginning to take on the changeless tone of a litany to which he was expected to make responses. He grew a little careless of his answers, into one or two of which a note of recklessness had crept. Almost any other man, taxed with these indiscretions from his private life, would not have known how to dispose of them. But to Carson's questions, reiterated with reference to each boy's name as it was introduced—"What *was* there in common between this young man and yourself? What *attraction* had he for you?"—Wilde replied, with all the self-confidence in the world:

"I delight in the society of people much younger than myself. I like those who may be called idle and careless. I recognise no social distinctions of any kind; and to me youth, the mere fact of youth, is so wonderful that I would rather talk to a young man for half an hour than be even—well, cross-examined in court by an eminent Irish Queen's Counsel."

Postponed for a short while yet was that unfortunate slip made by the prosecutor when asked to recall what had passed between himself and a youth named Walter Grainger. For still to be resurrected were three other spectres from the past. Of the first of these Mr. Carson, who appeared to take some satisfaction in adding each fresh name to the now formidable list, asked:

When did you first meet Fred Atkins?—In October, 1892.

Did he seem to you an idle fellow?—Well, yes. But he was ambitious to go on the music-hall stage. We did not discuss literature. I would not have allowed him to. The art of the music-hall was as far as he got.

Did you ask him to go to Paris with you?—Yes.

When you were in Paris, did you suggest that he should have his hair curled?—He suggested it himself, and I said it would be very unbecoming, and I told him it was a silly

thing to do, an absurd thing. I should have been very angry if he had had his hair curled.

You dined with him?—Yes.

Gave him an excellent dinner?—I never had anything else. I do everything excellently.

Did you give him plenty of wine at dinner?—As I have said before, anyone who dines at my table is not stinted in wine. If you mean, did I ply him with wine, I say “No!” It’s monstrous, and I won’t have it.

Did any improprieties ever take place between you and Atkins?—None whatever.

You knew a man named Ernest Scarfe?—Yes. He was introduced to me by Taylor. He is a young man of about twenty, of no occupation. I asked Scarfe to dine with myself and Taylor at Kettner’s. I did not afterwards take him back to my rooms. I have never embraced, kissed or caressed him.

Why did you ask him to dinner?—Because I am so good-natured. It is a good action to ask to dinner those beneath one in social station.

When did you first know Sidney Mavor?—In September, 1892.

Why did you give him a cigarette case when you had known him only a month?—I give what presents I like to anybody I like. Mavor stayed with me one night at an hotel in Albemarle Street in October, 1892. I asked him to stay with me for companionship, pleasure, amusement. I like to have people staying with me.

Did you find pleasure in his society that night?—Yes, in the evening and at breakfast. It amused and pleased him that I should ask him to be my guest at a very nice, charming hotel.

Do you know Walter Grainger?—Yes.

How old is he?—He was about sixteen when I knew him. He was a servant in a house in High Street, Oxford, where Lord Alfred Douglas had rooms. I have stayed there several times. Grainger waited at table. I never dined with him.

If it is one's duty to serve, it is one's duty to serve; and if it is one's pleasure to dine, it is one's pleasure to dine.

Did you ever kiss him?—Oh, dear no. He was a peculiarly plain boy. He was, unfortunately, extremely ugly. I pitied him for it.

Was that the reason why you did not kiss him?—Oh, Mr. Carson, you are pertinently insolent!

Did you say that in support of your statement that you never kissed him?—No. It is a childish question.

Did you ever put that forward as a reason why you never kissed the boy?—Not at all.

Why, sir, did you mention that this boy was extremely ugly?—For this reason. If I were asked why I did not kiss a doormat, I should say because I do not like to kiss doormats. I do not know why I mentioned that he was ugly, except that I was stung by the insolent question you put to me and the way you have insulted me throughout this hearing.

Why did you mention his ugliness?—It is ridiculous to imagine that any such thing could have occurred under any circumstances.

Then why did you mention his ugliness, I ask you?—You insulted me by an insulting question.

Was that a reason why you should say the boy was ugly?

Confused, badly flustered even for the moment, Wilde attempted several times to find an answer, but each time failed. "*Why? Why? Why did you add that?*" Carson demanded, and at last the witness, recovering himself, replied:

You sting me and insult me and try to unnerve me; and at times one says things flippantly when one ought to speak more seriously. I admit it.

Then you said it flippantly?—Oh, yes, it was a flippant answer.

That afternoon, listening to Mr. Carson's opening speech for the defence, Sir Edward Clarke had to decide whether or

not he should advise his client to withdraw from the prosecution. It seemed highly improbable, in view of what had been revealed concerning Wilde's associates, that Queensberry would be found guilty, or that his plea of justification would not be accepted. In which case Wilde might not only find himself in an extremely awkward position, but even be arrested in open court.

During the lunch interval Wilde had asked him if Carson was entitled to put questions about anything under the sun he chose, and upon being told that this was so, had remarked how unfortunate it would be if he brought up an incident—which of course he might easily *not* have heard of—that had taken place some time ago at the Albemarle Hotel.

"What incident was that?" asked Sir Edward.

"I was turned out of the hotel in the middle of the night and a boy was with me."

Back in court, Sir Edward, his eyes on the ceiling, heard Mr. Carson say :

"I hope I have sufficiently demonstrated to the jury already that Lord Queensberry was absolutely justified in bringing to a climax the connection of Mr. Oscar Wilde and Lord Alfred Douglas. I am not here to say that anything has ever happened between Lord Alfred Douglas and Mr. Oscar Wilde. God forbid! But everything shows that the young man is in a dangerous position.

"There is a startling similarity in all the cases that have been raised against Mr. Wilde. In each we find no equality in age, education, or position with Wilde. But on the other hand there is a curious similarity in the ages of the young men themselves.

"Let us contrast the position which Mr. Wilde took up in cross-examination as to his books, which are for the select and not for the ordinary individual, with the position he assumed as to the young men to whom he was introduced and those he picked up for himself. His books were written by an artist for artists; his words were not for Philistines or

illiterates. Contrast that with the way in which Mr. Wilde chose his companions!

"He took up with Charles Parker, a gentleman's servant, whose brother was a gentleman's servant; with young Alphonse Conway, who sold papers on the pier at Worthing; and with Scarfe, also a gentleman's servant. Then his excuse was no longer that he was dwelling in regions of art but that he had such a democratic soul that he drew no social distinctions, and that it was quite as much pleasure to have the sweeping boy from the streets to lunch or dine with him as the greatest *litterateur* or artist . . ."

As the day's proceedings drew to their close Sir Edward decided what course of action he must adopt the following morning. Before the court opened, he would advise Wilde to withdraw from the prosecution; pointing out to him that in the circumstances no jury would convict—how could their sympathy not be with a father seeking to protect his son from evil?—and that once the plea of justification had been proved, the judge could only order the prosecutor's arrest.

Also, he would inform his client that there was no need for him to be present in court when the announcement of his withdrawal from the case was made. In Sir Edward's private opinion his client would do well to choose that moment for leaving the country. For in doing so he would be showing a regard for his own safety that hitherto he had neglected to an alarming degree.

Chapter Ten

CONTINUING, on the third morning of the trial, his opening speech for the defence, Mr. Carson was in the midst of commenting upon Wilde's conduct with Alphonse Conway -- "The whole thing in its audacity is almost past belief" -- when his gown was gently plucked at by Sir Edward Clarke. After an exchange of whispers, Mr. Carson sat down and Sir Edward rose to address the judge:

"May I claim your lordship's indulgence while I interpose to make a statement, which of course is made under a feeling of very great responsibility?"

"Those who represent Mr. Wilde in this case cannot conceal from themselves that the judgment that might be formed on the literary questions might not improbably induce the jury to say that Lord Queensberry, in using the word 'posing', was using a word for which there was sufficient justification to entitle him to be relieved of a criminal charge in respect of his statement. And I, and my learned friends associated with me in this matter, have to look forward to this-- that a verdict, given to the defendant on that part of the case, might be interpreted outside as a conclusive finding with regard to all parts of the case.

"We feel that we cannot resist a verdict of 'Not Guilty' --having regard to the word 'posing'. I trust that this may make an end of the case."

Rising to his feet, Mr. Carson said :

"If there is a plea of 'Not Guilty', a plea which involves that the defendant has succeeded in his plea of justification, I am satisfied. Of course, the verdict will be that the plea of justification is proved, and that the words were published for the public benefit."

On the judge's direction the jury returned a verdict of not

guilty : a verdict resulting in cheers from the spectators that the ushers did little to silence.

Sir Edward's hope that his client, who had left by a side door to avoid the crowds in front of the Old Bailey, would now catch the first train to the Continent, was not realised. Wilde might have had time to do this had he made up his mind and acted at once. But in the confusion and anxiety of the moment he was unable to come to any decision. Instead he went with Douglas, who had been in court throughout the trial, to the Holborn Viaduct Hotel across the street, where before lunching in a room already booked he sat down and wrote a letter to the editor of the *Evening News* :

Sir,

It would have been impossible for me to have proved my case without putting Lord Alfred Douglas in the witness box against his father. Lord Alfred Douglas was extremely anxious to go into the box, but I would not let him do so. Rather than put him into so painful a position, I determined to retire from the case, and to bear on my own shoulders whatever ignominy and shame might result from my prosecuting Lord Queensberry.

Yours, etc.,

Oscar Wilde.

At the same time a note was being written in an office off the Strand by Lord Queensberry's solicitors to the Director of Prosecutions,

Re Oscar Wilde :

Dear Sir,

In order that there may be no miscarriage of justice, I think it my duty at once to send you a copy of all our witness's statements together with a copy of the shorthand notes of the trial.

Yet another note was simultaneously despatched, this time by Queensberry himself, to his enemy :

If the country allows you to leave, all the better for the country; but if you take my son with you, I will follow you, wherever you go, and shoot you !

It must have struck anyone who observed them lunching together at the Holborn Viaduct Hotel, that despite his efforts to save his precious son from contamination by Wilde, Queensberry had singularly failed. Had he known of their present whereabouts he might even have used his revolver on the spot. Although it seems more likely that, aware of how soon Mr. Wilde must be taking his place in the dock, he was far too excited by the prospect of witnessing that event to prevent its occurring.

At lunch a certain amount of argument took place, though Douglas showed great concern for his friend, whose plight had now become serious indeed. On the verge of tears, Wilde protested that this vile conspiracy against him was more than he could stand, and that another hour of the awful suspense he was enduring, would finish him. In his despair he even suggested that the authorities might take it into their heads to have Bosie arrested too; which suggestion the latter dismissed as being extremely improbable, and thereafter did what he could to induce his distressed companion to make some effort to pull himself together.

"We had better, Oscar," he said, "go straight from here to see George Lewis. Didn't I tell you to go to him in the first place? But you would listen to that absurd Ross. It may still not be too late. Lewis will tell us what to do."

But George Lewis, when they faced him, shook his wise head and threw up his hands. Had they come to him in the first place it would have been a different matter. He would have told Wilde not to be a fool, but to tear up Queensberry's card and forget the whole incident. Now he saw no help for it. Events, he was very much afraid, must be allowed to take their inevitable course.

With the shrewd lawyer's unhelpful words ringing in their

caus, they drove to the Cadogan Hotel in Sloane Street, where Douglas had a suite of rooms. And there, during the gloomy afternoon, his intimates arrived to commiserate with the unhappy dramatist—among them Robert Ross and Reginald Turner. He must, they insisted, leave for Dover at once, and cross to Calais by the next boat. But of their entreaties he took no notice, muttering between sips of hock and seltzer that the train had already gone, and that it was too late now to do anything. In his indecision he was pathetic to behold; an overgrown child suddenly giving way to the pressure of adverse circumstance.

Of incalculable value to Wilde at this juncture would have been the sympathetic attention of a strong-minded woman, than whom nobody in this world is better qualified to deal with a crisis in any man's life. Unfortunately he had only men to flutter round him: men who in spite of their devotion and concern for him, were not unmindful of the consequences to themselves that his fall from grace might quite easily have. For, like him, they had sought their pleasures in defiance of an Act passed only ten years previously and existing in no other civilised country. Their position, particularly since they were known personally to some of the treacherous witnesses whose names had been mentioned in court during the past two days, was none too secure. Once the witch-hunt was on, might they not also be dragged into the open and accused?

But if they were ineffectual, these Bosies and Robbies and Reggies—none of whom was quite adult in the control of his emotions—they did what they could to assist their master, who seemed suddenly incompetent to do anything for himself. While Robbie went round to Tite Street to inform Mrs. Wilde of what was happening ("I hope," the poor woman said between sobs, "Oscar is going away abroad") Bosie, in order to put an end to the suspense, went down to the House of Commons to ask his cousin, George Wyndham, if he could find out what the authorities intended to do. From him he learned presently that their intention was to prosecute; but

by the time he returned to the hotel with this piece of news, Wilde had already been arrested.

It was after six o'clock when a knock came on the door of room No. 53. Inspector Richards of Scotland Yard, accompanied by another police officer, entered :

"Mr. Oscar Wilde?" he said, approaching the familiar figure in the armchair, who was smoking a cigarette and attempting to concentrate on a novel.

"Yes?" he said, putting aside the book.

"We are police officers and hold a warrant for your arrest on a charge of committing indecent acts. I must ask you to accompany me to the police station."

"Where shall I be taken to?"

"You will have to go to Scotland Yard with me and then to Bow Street."

"Can I have bail?"

"I don't think you can. But that is a matter for the magistrate to decide."

"Well, if I must go, I will give you the least possible trouble."

Before his departure in the custody of the two police officers, he wrote: "Dear Bosie: I shall be at Bow Street to-night. Go and see George Alexander and Lewis Waller and ask them to go bail for me." Since both these actors were successfully presenting plays of his--the former *The Importance of Being Earnest* at the St. James's, the latter *An Ideal Husband* at the Haymarket--they occurred to him as the two men most likely to respond to his appeal.

Directly Wilde had been taken away, Ross went round again to Tite Street, this time to fetch him a change of clothes. Mrs. Wilde had already left the house and gone to some relatives, having first locked the doors of her husband's bedroom and study. With the help of a man-servant who had remained behind, they were burst open. But Ross might have saved himself the trouble, for upon his arrival at Bow Street with the garments he had hastily stuffed into a bag, he was told that he could neither see his friend nor leave

anything for him. Immediately he returned to Chelsea and took possession of what letters and manuscripts of Wilde's he could find, taking them for safe keeping to his own mother's house. And there, the excitement of the day and the nervous strain it had produced, proving too much for him, Robbie promptly collapsed.

Douglas, however, on reading the note left for him at the hotel, rushed off to Bow Street and offered to stand bail for his friend's temporary release. He was told that bail could not be accepted that night, and that if it were accepted at all, other securities besides himself would be required. So he forthwith interviewed Mr. Alexander and Mr. Waller at their respective theatres, and learned from each in turn that they could not see their way to assisting Mr. Oscar Wilde in his predicament.

For all concerned it was a disastrous ending to a disastrous day. Except, of course, for Lord Queensberry and his supporters, many of whom were gathered outside the Police Court yelling foul obscenities; in the drunken belief, presumably, that these would reach the ears of the unhappy man pacing his cell. And at that very moment, through a peephole, journalists were being allowed the special, if unofficial, privilege of observing how the mighty had fallen. "Did you know," Wilde later said to a friend, recalling the incident with a shudder, "that when I was arrested the police let the reporters come to the cell and stare at me—as if I had been a monster on show?"

Next morning, after a remand had been asked for, the prisoner was removed in a van to Holloway Gaol, where until his trial on 26th May he remained in custody. On each occasion when he appeared at the Police Court his defending counsel applied for bail:

"You can understand," Mr. Travers Humphreys said to the magistrate, "that there are witnesses to be obtained for the defence, and it is very difficult for Mr. Wilde to communicate with persons and prepare his defence unless he is to have the facilities of a man at liberty." And he added

that although the prisoner had been for some hours aware that a warrant was likely to be issued for his arrest, he had made no attempt to escape.

But the magistrate obstinately refused. Neither in Wilde's case, nor in the case of Alfred Taylor, who now had been charged too, could he consider the application.

"I have," he said, "to use my discretion according—in the words of a great judge—to the evidence given and the gravity of the accusation. With regard to the gravity of the case, I think there is no worse crime than that with which the prisoners are charged. As to the evidence, all I shall say is that I do not think it slight, and I shall therefore refuse bail."

Considering that Wilde and his fellow prisoner were charged with a misdemeanour under Section XI of the Criminal Law Amendment Act, 1885, than which many crimes—murder amongst them—are generally supposed to be more heinous, the magistrate may be said to have lost his sense of proportion. But in this he was not alone. For the prejudice shown against Wilde, by the press and public alike, during the four weeks he was in Holloway Gaol awaiting trial, proved once again the worthlessness of the fiction that in England a man is treated as innocent until he is proved guilty.

By the community at large—now that he was down and at least deserving of pity—Wilde was kicked and spat upon. Contemptuously ridiculed by the proletariat, he was indignantly accused by the aristocracy of letting down the side; while the middle classes, whose prim lips could not be brought to mention his name, loathed him in discreet silence. As for his friends, many of them had fled the country, hoping for one thing to be forgotten until after the scandal had died down, and for another to indulge without official interference the peculiar practices which they favoured. Among these voluntary exiles were the ever faithful Ross and Turner, for whom events had at the moment proved almost too devastating to be endured.

As incongruous to Wilde as the fact that Holloway Gaol's castellated façade was a replica of Warwick Castle, was the fact of his own incarceration within its high walls.

"Why should they do this thing to me?" he had piteously asked himself coming along in the Black Maria; into one of whose hutch-like compartments his large body had been ignominiously squeezed, and the key turned upon it. "The Holloway Bus" he had heard it called by his fellow passengers, none of whom could he see, but whose foul language and rank odour filled the horse-drawn vehicle that rumbled through the North London streets like a gigantic hearse.

It was not as if those in charge of him, the Governor or the warders, were unkind: he felt that they even went out of their way to show him a sort of rough courtesy. But the rules it was their duty to enforce, albeit with a half apologetic air, were as unimaginative as they were cruel when applied to an adult person. The humiliation of being denied a watch in his cell (how could it have harmed him to know what hour it was?); the going to bed by daylight that made each night seem so interminable: not being allowed to smoke: these impositions and privations made it impossible to focus his thoughts upon those problems of the immediate future which so obviously demanded a clear head.

Preceded by rattling keys— that made the prisoner wonder each time he heard them if it was seriously considered unsafe for him to be at large, lest he seduced at sight the flower of the nation's manhood—a warder came into the cell. He announced that he would escort the prisoner to see a visitor who had called to see him.

From his pallet Wilde rose despondently, knowing full well that this could not be the one visit to which he so eagerly looked forward; the visit without which, he told himself, he would be unable any longer to keep up even the semblance of resignation to his fate that he tried to preserve. No, this would be his solicitor, calling to discuss the case; that good man whose patient questions drove him nearly to distraction; of whom he was later to recall:

“What is loathsome to me is the memory of interminable visits paid by the solicitor Humphreys, when in the ghastly glare of a bleak room I would sit with a serious face telling serious lies to a bald man till I really groaned and yawned with ennui.”

The seemingly endless boredom of each long day he found harder than anything else to bear. Books he was allowed to read, and these one or two loyal friends, like Ada Leverson and Adela Schuster, sent him. Also there were letters to write when he felt in the mood. But for the most part he paced his cell in an agony of restlessness, by this means walking farther than he had ever done in his life before, accustomed as he had always been to taking a cab even to cross the road.

To his surprise—he must have mistaken the day—it was not Mr. Humphreys who had come to visit him, but a Mr. Harris; if the warder had heard aright. He had not seen Frank since that somewhat unfortunate afternoon at the Café Royal, when, having turned down his well-meant advice, he and Bosie had walked out in a huff. How much had happened since then!

It was only to be expected that the self-important Mr. Harris, in his dual rôle of Prisoner’s Friend and Boswell, should make an appearance in the arena, now that a Roman Holiday had been declared. Disdaining a visit under routine conditions, which would have necessitated his talking to Wilde through a sort of barred cage, in semi-darkness, and at the top of his voice in order to make himself heard above the chatter of the other visitors, he made application to higher authorities for permission to see him in a private room. A warder, however, had to be present at the interview, which took place under conditions more suitable to children in a nursery, than to a lord of language and his recording angel.

Catching sight of Wilde’s despondent figure and unshaven face as he was brought by a warder into the bare room, Harris decided to cheer him up.

“How good to see you, Oscar!” he cried, with as much

joviality as if he had unexpectedly run into his friend on the front at Brighton. It was a somewhat inapt greeting, all things considered, and not improved upon by the question which blithely followed it: "Are the warders treating you kindly?"

"They are the only people who do, Frank. The whole world is against me."

"Nonsense! You must get such morbid ideas right out of your head. Determination to win is half the battle. And of course you are going to win."

Wilde, the tears misting his eyes, said: "In this house of torture I cannot even collect my thoughts properly. How could they have refused me bail, after I had made no attempt to run away?"

"You should," said Harris, lapsing all at once into French, "have left the country when you had the chance."

Here the warder civilly interposed to announce that by the rules, which he had to see were obeyed, it was not permitted to talk in a foreign language, nor to refer to Holloway Gaol as a place of torture: "But I shall not report it this time," he said; for which kindness his charge threw him a look of gratitude.

This interview between the prisoner and his visitor was not of long duration, though its brevity would scarcely have struck those who read the visitor's account of it, as it came to be written by him some years later. Alone of those who recorded what speech they had with Wilde—and there were many—Harris appears always to have talked as much to his friend as his friend talked to him; but whilst his own contribution to the discourse is easily recognisable, Wilde's is not. Being a journalist of the romantic school, to whom colourful embellishment comes more easily than a simple statement of fact, Harris never hesitated to put into another's mouth the words he considered should most effectively have come out of it; even at the cost of sheer invention on his own part. The regret, expressed by Wilde with a sigh:

"What I wouldn't give for a cigarette, Frank, but here

we are not allowed to smoke"; by the time his biographer had finished embroidering it, became:

"You can never know, Frank, what it means to me to be without a cigarette. Unless I can smoke I cannot sleep, and when I cannot sleep all the past comes back: the fleeting hours of my golden youth at Oxford. How I wish I could gaze upon those spires now—they might give me the courage I need."

But if Harris romanticised, Wilde did too: the more so at this moment, when to have been without some ennobling myth to cling to for support, might have lost him reason. And in the myth that he unconsciously created, believing it to be the essence of truth, Bosie became once more the centre of his existence; the dearest of all boys, the divine thing of grace and beauty.

In the twilight of Holloway he saw himself as David, and Bosie as Jonathan; their beautiful friendship overshadowed by a vengeful Saul. This identification of himself and Bosie with the characters in biblical history, Wilde found immensely satisfying. It provided the emotional stimulus he needed to keep afloat in the sea of trouble surrounding him. Conveniently forgotten, for the time, were the quarrels they had had in the past, the numerous occasions upon which he had expressed to his young friend the hope that he would go out of his life, and stay out. Nor did it worry him that no parallel was to be drawn between David's adoring followers in Israel, and those sinister individuals in the West End of London whose favours he himself had won at the price of sumptuous meals and silver cigarette cases. He adapted to his needs—as indeed is the custom of those who seek comfort from religion—only such particles of holy writ as were urgently required.

What man in his unhappy state would not have welcomed, above all other visitors to his gloomy prison, the one to whom he was so closely bound in his misfortune, and for whose sake—he had come near to persuading himself—he was now a willing martyr?

"I saw Oscar yesterday in a private room," wrote Douglas to a friend, "and he gave me your three letters and asked me to write and tell you how deeply touched he was by your kindness and sympathy and loyalty to him in his terrible and undeserved trouble. He himself is so ill and unhappy that he has not sufficient strength and energy to write, and all his time has to be devoted to preparing his defence against a diabolical conspiracy, which seems almost unlimited in its size. I will not add to your sorrow by telling you of the privations and sufferings he has to endure . . . In spite of all the brutal and cowardly clamour of our disgusting newspapers, I think the sympathy of all decent men is with him, and that he will ultimately triumph; but he has much to go through first. I have determined to remain here and do what I possibly can, though I am warned on all hands that my own risk is not inconsiderable and my family implore me to go away."

But to the warning, given him by his father's solicitors, that it would be safer, in view of how continually his name had been linked with Wilde's, to leave the country, Douglas replied :

"Do you really expect me to believe that I am in the slightest danger of being arrested and charged with him? You must take me for a fool! Why, I'm up at Holloway practically every day. And if not there, at Bow Street. So that if the police want me, they certainly know where to look."

Whatever Douglas's faults, disloyalty was not at this time to be numbered among them. He felt bound, however, to listen to the argument as it was put to him by Sir Edward Clarke, who had now offered to defend Wilde at his trial without taking any fee for his services.

"I feel I should point out to you," Sir Edward said, "that your continued association with Wilde since the collapse of his case against your father is creating a great deal of comment and prejudice. It really would be very much better for your friend, you know, if you went abroad."

So he asked his friend, at what was to be his last visit to Holloway:

“What am I to do, Oscar? Do you want me to go away and leave you?”

The tears starting to run down his harassed, unshaven face, Wilde said:

“Yes, Bosie dear, I think perhaps it is wiser. By remaining away until after the trial is over you may put me in a better position in the eyes of the world.”

They were not to see one another again for some time to come. By which time many men had taken it upon themselves to discipline Wilde's life according to their own notions of what was good for him.

Chapter Eleven

WHEN, after lying awake for weary hours in his dreadful little room with its painted brick walls and opaque window, he at last fell asleep, Wilde knew a momentary relief from the agony of mind he had suffered during the day. Only then could he walk where he chose, a man whose free passage was no longer blocked at every turn by a sentinel with a bunch of keys at his waist and a word of command on his lips.

And in his dreams appeared often the two women most deeply affected by the scandal he had created, each of them forced to share with him the hatefulness of seeing their proud name become suddenly a byword; one from which conventional-minded people turned in disgust, and that the wallowers in the stews made sport with as they turned it over on their ribald tongues.

The sound of their weeping was not to be heard above the abuse hurled at Wilde by his detractors. They wept, nevertheless, these two pathetic creatures forgotten in the background, whose love for a son, and for a husband, had shown them nothing of his secret ways, and to whom the secret itself, revealed in all its crudity, came as a bewildering shock.

Constance Lloyd had not enjoyed eleven years of marital bliss as Oscar's wife. And yet it would have been hard for her to say what exactly was responsible for the uneven course their life together had followed, apart from admitting that the difference in their respective temperaments had played its part; undermining, gently but firmly, the love and admiration they had once felt for each other.

Not that to anyone aware of their circumstances it wasn't more or less obvious why Oscar and Constance were unable to make a success of marriage: they had married, without realising it at the time, for quite the wrong reasons.

Constance's first meeting with her future husband had been at a young people's party given by his mother, Lady Wilde, at her house in Merrion Square, Dublin. The daughter of an Irish barrister, who had died when she was a child, Constance made a home with her grandfather, preferring his company to that of her mother's second husband. Life for her was fairly uneventful, although had she but waited for the appearance in it of a serious-minded suitor with ambitions to become a bishop of the Church of Ireland, there can be little doubt that she would have ended up a good deal happier than actually turned out to be the case. But to be selected for special attention by Lady Wilde's brilliant son Oscar, on one of his infrequent visits from London (where he was said to have made quite a name for himself), was an experience not easily to be forgotten. She fell immediately under the spell of his fine eyes and of his enchanting voice; and for two years during which he travelled extensively on his lecture tours remained faithful to his memory; to the extent, even, of turning down two offers of marriage in the expectation that one from him would eventually be forthcoming.

Her 'adorable Oscar', as he had now become, proposed in November 1883; after which her letters to him provided a release for her pent up emotions.

In these she told him that once he was her husband she would prove herself to be such a loving and devoted wife that he would never want to leave her side. She was to be his joy and his comfort at all times. His own dear letters to her, she said, made her gloriously happy; made her, too, want to have him with her every minute of the day, that she might be in his arms and assure herself that their devotion to each other was not just a dream, but a living and wonderful reality.

Wilde was no less exuberant at the prospect of changing his single state for that of a life-long attachment to Constance; over whose sweet and gentle nature, to say nothing of her violet eyes, light chestnut hair, and perfect com-

plexion, he rhapsodised endlessly to his friends. Certainly they believed themselves to be passionately in love. And in this they may not have been mistaken. Although it seemed also probable that the facts to which the very ardour of their loving blinded them, were the ones which had caused them to consider marriage in the first place : Constance's desire to escape from a dull home; Oscar's need to acquire the financial security that his wife's income, small as it was, would provide him with.

They were married in May 1884, at St. James's Church, Paddington. Crowds gathered to watch the well-known author lead his young bride from the altar, among them a reporter with an aptitude for recording detail. Mrs. Wilde's dress, the public was next day informed, was of rich creamy satin and tinted a delicate shade of cowslip. The bodice, cut square and somewhat low in front, was finished with a high Medici collar; the ample sleeves were puffed; and the skirt, made plain, was gathered by a silver girdle of beautiful workmanship, the gift of Mr. Oscar Wilde.

From their honeymoon in Paris they returned to what promised to be an ideally happy existence at the house they had taken in Tite Street, Chelsea. Like many newly married couples, they could not bear to be long out of each other's sight, and frequently Oscar was seen by friends accompanying his beloved Constance on shopping expeditions in the West End.

Emotionally undeveloped as he was, marriage had for Wilde the novelty of a game into which it delighted him to put his best efforts. Playing at Husbands and Wives, as the game might have been called, afforded him many pleasures, one of which was to dress-up his wife in period costumes of his own design and exhibit her as if she had been a prize doll that he was proud to have won in a lottery. At afternoon receptions in Tite Street Mrs. Wilde's guests were as likely to be received by her in the guise of a Greek slave, as in that of a mediæval princess.

"Doesn't Constance look too marvellous?" her husband

would say, as he moved easily about the drawing-room, taking pride in her natural beauty and the setting he had devised for it. But Constance would much have preferred not to be on show. No lover of the limelight, she was relieved always when, as the afternoon wore on, she could retire into the background as a member of the audience that Oscar never failed to enchant with his conversation.

To live up to such a scintillating husband would have been a difficult task for a woman far more sophisticated than poor Constance, who had no pretensions to being an intellectual. Yet even in the face of her more flagrant departures from artistic sensitivity—as when she declared the verses of Felicia Hemans to be just as appealing as those of Keats or Shelley—Oscar was never anything but extremely patient: a virtue which must have called for some forbearance on his part, especially when she failed on numerous occasions to grasp whether he meant what he said to be taken seriously, or was merely exercising his wit.

Her genuine interest in Church missionaries, for instance, led him once to point out to her that these good people were the divinely appointed food of destitute and underfed cannibals: "Whenever they are on the brink of starvation, Heaven, in its infinite mercy, sends them a nice plump missionary." To which she responded: "Oh, Oscar, you can only be joking!"

After their two sons were born, Cyril in 1885, and Vyvyan a year later, Constance was too much taken up with domestic responsibilities to humour her husband's whims: their mutual devotion she assumed as a matter of course, leaving him to go his own way with the host of admirers he had—writers and artists and actors—whose interests it was only natural that he should want to share. They were less together now than they had once been; Oscar often stayed away from home, occupying rooms he engaged especially to write in, or spent week-ends in the country with socially important people. When he was at home he entertained guests who certainly amused him more than they did her; men whose minds, she could only suppose, were far above her own. But

for none of these things had she cause to blame him. In her eyes he remained, very much the godlike creature she had fallen in love with, and she was sufficiently in awe of him still to hold that the most extravagant behaviour on his part was to be excused as the privilege of an altogether exceptional man; a genius, if some of their friends were to be believed.

But if he was a genius, he was an affectionate father too; idolised by his small sons, to whom he had always known precisely how to talk; and whose wide-eyed interest when they were babies he had held with entrancing fairy-tales that he improvised as he went along. Also he had made toys for them to play with over which he took infinite pains, and it was at such moments as these, coming upon him unexpectedly in the nursery, that Constance felt herself closest to him.

Very different in every way from his wife, was Wilde's mother, who saw in her second son, to whom she was devoted, all that she herself might have been: the creator of immortal works on which future generations could nourish their minds. Not that in her younger days, she often told herself, she hadn't come near to achieving this great ambition. But any regrets she had for the unfair way life had treated her in the past, she dismissed in the face of what her dear Oscar had so splendidly achieved.

A spirited girl with striking looks, Jane Francesca Elgee had been in her teens a daughter of the revolution that was known as the Young Ireland movement, into which she unreservedly threw her energies. As a self-styled 'poetess of the revolt', she had contributed under the pseudonym of 'Speranza' verses in which political ardour was more evident than poetic quality: exhortations, for the most part, against the English tyrant, for whose destruction she demanded 'a hundred thousand muskets glittering brightly in the light of heaven'. But in later years, as the wife of Sir William Wilde, the distinguished Surgeon Oculist in Ordinary to the Queen in Ireland, she abandoned these political enthusiasms for motherhood and an exclusive interest in the arts. And when

later still she came as a widow to live in England with her eldest son, Willie, she felt no qualms about accepting a Civil List pension, the bestowal of which, since her services to English (or any other) literature had been so extremely slight, remained somewhat inexplicable to her friends.

In London her receptions, if on a rather smaller scale than those she had given in Dublin, nevertheless attracted to her narrow house in Oakley Street a number of celebrated persons who went there either out of curiosity, or to make the acquaintance of her increasingly famous son, Oscar. Nor were they disappointed, for her functions were unlike any others, and she herself quite unique. On the sunniest of summer afternoons she preferred to receive her guests in heavily curtained rooms artificially lit by shaded candles; when she appeared looking very much like an actress who had come straight from the stage to the drawing-room without bothering to remove her make-up, or to lower the tone of a voice pitched to reach the back row of the gallery.

No less a celebrity than the poet Browning had accepted more than one of Lady Wilde's invitations, but it was left to Miss Marie Corelli to describe her as wearing "a train-dress of silver grey satin, with a hat as large as a small parasol and streamers of silver grey tulle all floating about her!"

A slightly grotesque figure poor Lady Wilde had undoubtedly become as the years advanced upon her, but she managed to retain a grace and dignity that not even the odd pieces of lace she wore, nor the strange ornaments she fastened them with, could entirely obscure. And no one could say that she didn't mean well; that she wasn't kindness itself to her guests, each of whom she introduced to the other with a whispered 'aside' that frequently could be heard at the other end of the room: "Lady Minster—you know—was in the chorus—married millions—husband went off his head—absolutely inconsolable—wants to marry a younger man this time—must have a good profile, she says."

She was said to be fonder of Willie, her eldest, than of Oscar. But this may only have been because Willie, who had not done much with his life, and lived with her now, needed her affection more than his successful brother. And the more successful Oscar became the less frequent were his visits to the house in Oakley Street. So that his mother had to excuse his absence to her now dwindling circle of callers: "He is always working and the world will not let him alone," she told them. "No one in London is so sought-after as dear Oscar."

And to dear Oscar she now looked for contributions towards her support, since what Willie earned precariously in Fleet Street he spent mostly on drink. From a rack put at the side of the fireplace in which she stuffed whatever bills had accumulated, Oscar always took a few when he came to the house, leaving with her when he went away the money to settle them.

Strange as it may have seemed to the millions in whose minds the name 'Oscar Wilde' had begun already to conjure up an image uglier than Caliban's, and far more unnatural, it was over his wife and children, and his mother, that he worried endlessly; pacing his little room in Holloway. Thought of the grief and shame he had brought upon those who looked up to and loved him for what, essentially, he knew himself to be—a fond husband and devoted son—he found unendurably hard to bear. That he should have done this thing to them, and to himself as an artist, was in its folly quite unforgivable.

But he held no grudge against the journalists who were flinging mud at him before his trial had commenced, the magistrate who for no good reason refused him bail, or the blackmailers and little catamites who were about to betray him in open court. These enemies of his bewildered rather than angered him. Himself never having intentionally hurt a soul, he was genuinely at a loss to understand why anybody should want to hurt him. Of certain professions, journalism in particular, he had spoken slightly in his

books and plays. But what had that to do with personalities? Why, there wasn't a hard-up journalist in Fleet Street to whose appeal for help he wouldn't have responded, irrespective of whether he could afford to.

At least he was spared the weight of a guilty conscience in regard to the practices of which he stood accused. Of his sexual habits he felt entirely unashamed, a fact which some months later he was to make plain in perhaps the longest letter ever written by one man to another :

"People thought it was dreadful of me," he then wrote, "to have entertained at dinner the evil things of life, and to have found pleasure in their company. But then, from the point of view through which I, as an artist in life, approach them, they were delightfully stimulating and suggestive. It was like feasting with panthers; the danger was half the excitement. . . ."

Later still, when informed that the panthers had been roused from their lair to give evidence against him at the instance of the actor Charles Brookfield, he exclaimed:

"How absurd of Brookfield !"

Resentment was simply not a part of his nature. That anyone should personally resent him, he found utterly incomprehensible.

Chapter Twelve

HAD he behaved now as once he advocated that a politician in a celebrated divorce case should have done, Wilde might have earned himself the reputation of a martyr amongst a wider circle than one composed only of men whose sexual peculiarities paralleled his own. Once he had said:

"People are so foolish in always denying the truth of these charges. I want to see the man who will face the judge in the Divorce Court, and not only confess but express his complete satisfaction with the experiment. As for the British public, they are always liable to stand on their hind legs and bray aloud that they are a moral people."

But for the greater part of his five days trial he appeared curiously unconcerned. The actor who had performed with such aplomb in the witness-box during his prosecution of Queensberry was no longer in evidence. In his place sat a man wearied to the point of apathy by his confinement in Holloway; a man made despondent by the amount of prejudice that had been worked up against him; the unfair treatment he had everywhere received.

Only on the last day but one of the proceedings, when in cross-examination he was asked to explain a phrase in a poem written by Lord Alfred Douglas, did he rise magnificently to the occasion, treating the hushed court to an example of spontaneous eloquence that was not to be equalled in any theatre. Much, however, had to be gone through—stones upturned for what they might reveal and dirty linen washed with frantic vigour—before this signal triumph was achieved.

Wilde found it hard to recognise himself in the Prosecuting Counsel's description of the prisoner who was alleged to have committed so many awful crimes. At times, even, he

seemed to be listening to the story of some unfortunate man whose identity was unknown to him. In fact he was unable to keep his attention from wandering, until it was caught suddenly by a chance phrase, or the sight of a familiar face, its gaze deliberately avoiding his own.

"I ask you, gentlemen," he heard the Prosecuting Counsel say, "to give this case, painful as it must necessarily be, your most earnest and careful consideration, and I assure you that the evidence I shall call will justify you in finding the prisoner guilty on all counts. . . . Call Charles Parker."

Into the witness-box stepped young Charlie Parker, as carefully dressed as he was coached in the part he was cast by the Prosecution to play. He answered the questions put to him with all the smug assurance of a wrongdoer who finds himself for once in the unique position of being able to tell the truth with impunity.

Twenty-one years of age, Charles said he was, his occupation that of a valet at present out of employment. Yes, he clearly remembered a day at the beginning of 1893 when he and his brother William got into conversation with a stranger in the bar of the St. James's Restaurant. The stranger turned out to be a Mr. Taylor, who spoke to them both—about men.

In what way?—He called attention to the prostitutes who frequent Piccadilly Circus and remarked, "I can't understand sensible men wasting their money on painted trash like that. Many do, though. But there are a few who know better. Now, you could get money in a certain way easily enough if you cared to." I understood to what Taylor alluded and made a coarse reply.

I am obliged to ask you what you actually said.—I do not like to say.

You were less squeamish at the time, I dare say. I ask you for the words.—I said that if any old gentleman with money took a fancy to me, I was agreeable. I *was* agreeable. I was terribly hard up.

What did Taylor say?—He laughed and said that men far cleverer, richer and better than I preferred things of that kind.

Did Taylor mention the prisoner Wilde?—Not at that time.

Where did you first meet Wilde?—Taylor asked us to visit him (Taylor) next day at Little College Street. We went the next morning. He said he could introduce us to a man who was good for plenty of money, and that we were to meet him (Taylor) at the St. James's bar. We went the next evening and saw Taylor there. He took us to a restaurant in Rupert Street. I think it was the Solferino. We were shown upstairs to a private room, in which there was a dinner-table laid for four. After a while Wilde came in and I was formally introduced. I had never seen him before, but I had heard of him. We all four sat down to dinner, Wilde sitting on my left.

Who made the fourth?—My brother, William Parker. I had promised Taylor that he should accompany me.

Was the dinner a good dinner?—Yes. The table was lighted with red-shaded candles. We had plenty of champagne with our dinner and brandy and coffee afterwards.

Of what nature was the conversation?—General, at first. Nothing was then said as to the purpose for which we had come together. •

And then?—Subsequently Wilde said to me, "This is the boy for me! Will you go to the Savoy Hotel with me?" I consented, and we went in a cab to the hotel.

More drink was offered you there?—Yes, we had liqueurs. Wilde then asked me to go into the bedroom with him. I was there about two hours. Before I left he gave me two pounds, telling me to call at the Savoy Hotel in a week.

Did you go?—Yes. He gave me three pounds the second time.

You visited Wilde on several other occasions, and for the same purpose?—Yes. At his rooms in St. James's Place.

Where else have you been with Wilde?—To Kettner's Restaurant.

What happened there?—We dined there. We always had a lot of wine. Wilde would talk of poetry and art during dinner, and of the old Roman days.

On one occasion you proceeded from Kettner's to Wilde's house?—Yes. We went to Tite Street. It was very late at night. Wilde let himself and me in with a latchkey. I remained the night, sleeping with the prisoner, and he himself let me out in the early morning before anyone was about.

Where else have you visited this man?—At the Albemarle Hotel. The same thing happened there.

Where did your last interview take place?—I last saw Wilde in Trafalgar Square about nine months ago. He was in a hansom and saw me. He alighted from the hansom and spoke to me.

What did he say?—He asked me how I was and said, "Well, you are looking as pretty as ever." He did not ask me to go anywhere with him then.

Having been cross-examined by Counsel for the Defence—an experience he endured without a trace of shame for the unsavoury aspects of his career that were brought to light in the process—Charlie was replaced in the witness-box by his brother William, who perkily recollected dining at the Solferino :

"I was present at the dinner with Taylor and Wilde described by the last witness," he said. "On that occasion Wilde paid all his attention to my brother. He often fed my brother off his own fork or out of his own spoon. My brother accepted a preserved cherry from Wilde's own mouth. My brother took it into his, and this trick was repeated three or four times. My brother went off with the prisoner to the Savoy and I remained behind with Taylor, who said, "Your brother is lucky. Oscar does not care what he says if he fancies a chap."

The feeling Wilde had listening to the mass of evidence so ponderously presented by the grave-faced, bewigged barristers, and so calmly spoken by the witnesses, was that the whole proceeding was vastly out of scale with himself. A tremendous fuss about nothing! As they were painstakingly dragged into the light, these episodes from the past bore only the slightest resemblance to what actually had occurred at the time. To snatch them from their context really was very misleading. Ordinary social engagements, harmless little jokes he had made, small gifts he had bestowed—these things were now spoken of with a solemnity that altogether distorted their significance.

"I am employed," he heard a man say, who called himself George Frederick Claridge, "by Messrs. Thornhill, Walter & Co., jewellers and silversmiths, of 144 New Bond Street, W. I supplied Mr. Wilde with silver cigarette cases and other articles. Mr. Wilde ordered one of the cigarette cases, which he bought, to be engraved with the inscription 'Sidney from O.W.' Instructions were given by Mr. Wilde for it to be sent to S. A. Mavor, Esq., at an address he gave."

"I am employed," said a Mr. Charles Robinson, "as a book-keeper at the Savoy Hotel. In March 1893, Mr. Wilde stayed at the hotel. He occupied rooms Nos. 361 and 362 and afterwards Nos. 343 and 346."

"I am a professor of massage," said Antonio Miggie, "and I attend the Savoy Hotel to massage patients. It was in March, 1893, from the 16th to the 20th of the month. One morning on going to the room—I entered after knocking—I saw someone in bed. At first I thought it was a young lady, as I saw only the head, but afterwards I saw it was a young man. It was someone about sixteen to eighteen years of age. Mr. Wilde was in the same room dressing himself. He told me he felt so much better that morning and that, as he was very busy, he could not stay to have treatment. I never attended Mr. Wilde again."

Without pause, the procession of witnesses wound its way in and out of court like a slimy dragon exuding poisonous

fumes. Now it was the commonplace voice of a detective describing the interior of Taylor's rooms :

"I obtained access," it said, "by means of a subterfuge. The rooms were darkened. Muslin was stretched across the windows. The walls and the ceiling were draped with muslin, and hung with fans and ornaments. There was no bedstead but there was a mattress on the floor. The place was scented . . ."

Under cross-examination in the witness-box, Wilde answered carefully the questions put to him. He had no wish at this stage to deliver himself of an epigram or neat turn of phrase : that he did so once or twice, causing laughter in court that was instantly silenced, was simply the result of a natural exuberance that even the strain of his predicament could not subdue.

. . . And these witnesses have, you say, lied throughout?—Their evidence as to my association with them, as to the dinners taking place and the small presents I gave them, is mostly true. But there is not a particle of truth in that part of the evidence which alleged improper behaviour.

Why did you take up with these youths?—I am a lover of youth.

You exalt youth as a sort of God? —I like to study the young in everything. There is something fascinating in youthfulness.

So you would prefer puppies to dogs and kittens to cats? —I think so. I should enjoy, for instance, the society of a beardless, briefless barrister quite as much as that of the most accomplished Q.C.

I hope the former, whom I represent in large numbers, will appreciate the compliment. These youths were all much inferior to you in station?—I never inquired, nor did I care, what station they occupied. I found them, for the most part, bright and entertaining. I found their conversation a change. It acted as a kind of mental tonic.

In reference to the incidents alleged against you at the Savoy Hotel, are you prepared to contradict the evidence of the hotel servants?—It is entirely untrue. Can I answer for what hotel servants say years after I have left the hotel? It is childish. I am not responsible for hotel servants. I have stayed at the hotel and been there constantly since.

There is no possibility of mistake? There was no woman with you?—Certainly not.

Why did you go to Taylor's rooms?—Because I met amusing people there.

A rather curious establishment, wasn't it, Taylor's?—I didn't think so.

You saw nothing peculiar or suggestive in the arrangement of Taylor's rooms?—I cannot say that I did. They were Bohemian. That is all. I have seen stranger rooms.

Did you notice that no one could see through the windows?—No; that I didn't notice.

He burned incense, did he not?—Pastilles, I think.

Incense, I suggest?—I think not. Pastilles, I should say, in those little Japanese things that run along rods.

Did it strike you that this place was at all peculiar?—Not at all.

Nor the sort of place you would usually visit in? Rather a rough neighbourhood?—That I don't know. I know it was near the Houses of Parliament.

You have made handsome presents to all these young fellows whose evidence we have been hearing?—Pardon me, I differ. I gave two or three of them a cigarette case. Boys of that class smoke a good deal of cigarettes. I have a weakness for presenting my acquaintances with cigarette cases.

Rather an expensive habit if indulged in indiscriminately, isn't it?—Less extravagant than giving jewelled garters to ladies.

Was the conversation of these young men literary?—No: but the fact that I had written a successful play seemed to

them very wonderful, and I was gratified by their admiration.

The admiration of these boys?—Yes. I am fond of praise. I like to be made much of.

By these boys?—Yes.

You like bright boys?—I like bright boys.

Did you not stop to consider whether it would be of the slightest service to lads in their position to be entertained in style by a man in your position?—No. They enjoyed it as schoolboys would enjoy a treat. It was something they did not get every day.

You looked on them as schoolboys?—They were amused by the little luxuries at the restaurants I took them to. The pink lampshades and so forth.

I wish to call your attention to the style of your correspondence with Lord Alfred Douglas.—I am ready. I am never ashamed of the style of my writings.

You are fortunate, or shall I say shameless? I refer to passages in two letters in particular.—Kindly quote them.

In letter number one you use the expression “Your slim gilt soul”, and you refer to Lord Alfred’s “red rose-leaf lips”. The second letter contains the words, “You are the divine thing I want”, and describes Lord Alfred’s letter as being “delightful, red and yellow wine to me.” Do you think that an ordinarily constituted being would address such expressions to a younger man?—I am not, happily, I think, an ordinarily constituted being.

It is agreeable to be able to agree with you Mr. Wilde.—There is nothing, I assure you, in either letter of which I need be ashamed. The first letter is really a prose poem, and the second more of a literary answer to one Lord Alfred had sent me.

The moment was almost at hand when his superbly eloquent reply to an unexpected question put to him by the Counsel for the Prosecution, was to earn for Wilde the admiration even of a few of his detractors.

You read Lord Alfred's poem "Two Loves"?—Yes.
It contains these lines :

"I am true love, I fill
The hearts of boy and girl with mutual flame."
Then sighing said the other, "Have thy will,
I am the love that dare not speak its name."

Was that poem explained to you?—I think that is clear.

There is no question as to what it means?—Most certainly not.

Is it not clear that the love described relates to natural and unnatural love?—No.

What is the "Love that dare not speak its name"?—"The Love that dare not speak its name" in this century is such a great affection of an elder for a younger man as there was between David and Jonathan, such as Plato made the very basis of his philosophy, and such as you find in the sonnets of Michelangelo and Shakespeare. It is that deep, spiritual affection that is as pure as it is perfect. It dictates and pervades great works of art like those of Shakespeare and Michelangelo, and those two letters of mine, such as they are. It is in this century misunderstood, so much misunderstood that it may be described as the "Love that dare not speak its name", and on account of it I am placed where I am now. It is beautiful, it is fine, it is the noblest form of affection. There is nothing unnatural about it. It is intellectual, and it repeatedly exists between an elder and a younger man, when the elder man has intellect, and the younger man has all the joy, hope and glamour of life before him. That it should be so the world does not understand. The world mocks at it and sometimes puts one in the pillory for it.

The applause, mingled with hisses, that greeted this speech, caused the judge severely to exclaim :

"If there is the slightest manifestation of feeling I shall have the Court cleared. There must be complete silence preserved."

Thereafter the spectators kept their feelings to themselves: feelings, nevertheless, which in their effect upon the jury may well have been the reason for its inability to arrive at a unanimous verdict. Upon which conclusion Sir Edward Clarke rose to his feet to say:

“I have now to make an application that Mr. Oscar Wilde be admitted to bail. I should think that after what has taken place the Crown would make no objection.”

But the Crown did not feel itself called upon to accede to the request. Upon application, however, to a judge in chambers, Wilde was some days later allowed his freedom during the interval preceding his re-trial.

Chapter Thirteen

ONLY because he had no idea of what horrors the evening and the night-time held for him, Wilde blessed the day of his release from Holloway. "Oh," he cried, waiting at Bow Street for the formalities of bail to be completed, "I hope all will come well, and that I can go back to Art and Life." Two weeks of freedom lay ahead of him, and in his heart he nursed the belief that a jury composed of twelve good men and true must surely include one at least who would refuse to condemn another for sins which he himself practised.

His sureties were Bosie's brother, Lord Douglas of Hawick, and the Rev. Stewart Headlam, a Church of England clergyman; each in the sum of £1,250. A comparative stranger to Wilde, the latter had come forward as a gesture in support of his contention that the prisoner had been unfairly treated by both the press and the public. For this piece of Christian charity he had had the windows of his house in Bloomsbury broken by an angry mob, and was instantly given notice by his housemaid. Replying to his critics some weeks later in *The Church Reformer*, he wrote:

"I was a surety, not for his character, but for his appearance in Court to stand his trial. I had very little personal knowledge of him at the time; I think I had only met him twice; but my confidence in his honour and manliness has been fully justified by the fact that (if rumour be correct) notwithstanding strong inducements to the contrary, he stayed in England and faced his trial."

In a cab, the first of many he was to take that day, Wilde went with Lord Douglas of Hawick to the Midland Hotel, St. Pancras, where rooms had been reserved for them. The

two men rested there for some hours, during which time, by way of a brief respite, they tried to forget their problems. But the attempt proved futile, for as they were about to start dinner, which was served in the sitting-room, the manager burst in upon them, full of agitation.

"You are Oscar Wilde, I believe," he said, and without waiting for a reply added: "I must ask you to leave this hotel at once."

In the bar below a gang of roughs hired by Queensberry had arrived with the news that a monster was inside the house and had better be got rid of before his presence contaminated the guests. Whilst the manager was seeing to this, drink flowed freely, and jokes of an incredible lewdness were made at the expense of the gentleman now in process of being ejected. When presently Wilde's large figure, buttoned into a frock-coat, came heavily down the stairs, he was eyed leeringly from behind half-closed doors, and in the street shouted obscenities followed his cab into the darkness; as indeed did the roughs themselves, whose instructions were on no account to lose sight of their prey.

"This will be my father's doing," Lord Douglas said, as they drove northwards in search of other accommodation. "He will have set these villains on our trail, with orders to make trouble for us wherever we go. I'm sure of it. Our only hope is somehow to shake them off."

Lord Douglas knew his father too well not to be correct in his assumption of what sly moves the old madman was up to. Far from being appeased by the calamity that had overtaken his enemy, he appeared bent upon kicking him now that he was down; conduct strangely at variance with the reputation he enjoyed in his own circle, as a British sportsman. Nor was his venomous spite directed only against this particular adversary; every member of his family had for weeks past been subjected to a barrage of insulting letters in connection with the case, the unpleasant nature of which had finally decided the recipients to leave the letters unopened.

That Bosie had really gone abroad the Marquess was disinclined to believe, in spite of being assured by the solicitors that he had done so. He suspected that his other son, Percy (Lord Douglas of Hawick), was sheltering his younger brother. For he no longer drew any distinction between his sons since the elder had also turned against him.

Percy, like the rest of the Douglas family, stood by Wilde not out of sympathy for his morals, but because he blamed his father for creating in the first place the scandal that now engulfed them all. Besides, one way and another he had suffered too much at the old man's hands to feel anything but an intense hatred for him. The feeling was reciprocated; and at this very moment when Wilde, in Percy's company, was seeking a shelter for the night, Queensberry, beside himself with rage at the thought of his son standing bail for the blackguard he sought to destroy, was denouncing him in a letter:

"Now he (Percy) joins in with them; he certainly has all the appearance to recommend him to the fraternity; white-livered, smoothed face, sicked-up looking creature, as if he had come up the wrong way. When he was a child swathed in irons to hold him together it used to make me sick to look at him and to think that he could be called my son, verily, 'tis a wise father who knows his own child."

At one hotel after another Wilde and his companion asked for rooms, a request which was refused them as soon as the roughs at their heels entered to reveal their identity. This merciless chase continued until past midnight, even in Kilburn and Notting Hill, neighbourhoods where Wilde was unlikely to have been recognised unless pointed out to the landlord by his pursuers; all of them by this time very much the worse for drink, and shouting hilariously as they swayed about the place.

"What are we to do, Percy?" the wretched man asked, turning his fine eyes, now filled with tears, upon his friend.

As an escaping convict he would better have understood his position, for then at least his pursuers would have had as

much justification for hunting him down as the others had for turning him from their doors. As it was, with no excuse save an hysteria that distorted their reason, they shunned him as they would have done a man riddled with some contagious disease. From the expressions of disgust that appeared on their honest faces he might have been a foul odour in their midst.

When eventually the roughs had been shaken off, or more probably had subsided in a drunken stupor, the two harassed men, half dead from fatigue, arrived in a cab at Lady Wilde's house in Oakley Street; which became at once the scene of a drama acted for all it was worth, the actors being Irish.

For personal reasons Wilde would not have knocked on the door of his mother's house that night unless it had been the last place of refuge he could think of in his desperate plight. For in that house his brother Willie lived, and between himself and Willie no strong bond of affection existed.

This had not always been so. At one time Willie Wilde was appreciated by everyone for the good fellow he was; his handsome looks, his rich Irish voice, his easy-going Bohemian ways—these qualities endeared him to men and women alike; and to his colleagues he was known as one of the most capable, if somewhat lazy, journalists in Fleet Street. He lost no opportunity in these early days of using what influence he had with editors to get his clever brother Oscar paragraphed in the papers, an attention for which the latter was grateful enough. Certainly Willie was a little too fond of his wine, a fault easy to overlook in one who nevertheless remained excellent company. And as yet he showed no signs of the dissolute tippler he later became—as the result, it appeared, of an unsuitable, rather than an unfortunate marriage.

Willie had married a wealthy American woman, the widow of a successful magazine proprietor. Captivated by his combination of charm and ability, she had taken him to New York with her, in the expectation that he would work

as hard at the business interests she had inherited, as she did herself. But Willie's ideas differed from hers, inasmuch as he saw no necessity for the husband of a rich woman to do any work at all. After a couple of years his exigent wife divorced him, saying to the reporters as she did so that he had been of no use to her either by day, or by night.

Poor deluded Willie had never really recovered from this shock. He returned to England a man sadly changed for the worse; a wreck of his former self, without charm, or talent. Once it had been possible to say of him that he enjoyed bouts of excessive conviviality. Now the fact had to be faced that he was a drunkard, a garrulous soaker, dishevelled in appearance and none too clean in his person. Whereas his brother had said of him in the old days: "Dear Willie occasionally takes an alcoholiday," he came later to express the less indulgent view: "He sponges on everyone but himself."

The estrangement between the two brothers may not have been conspicuous to an outsider, for the reason that a sort of family pride prevented Willie from speaking ill of Oscar in public, though he said things to his face that hurt. As for Oscar, he was far too good-natured to nurse a serious grievance against anyone, least of all poor Willie. But for some time past they had avoided one another, which made Wilde's arrival at Oakley Street in the hour of his extremity the more humiliating.

Vaguely aware of a knock on the front door, Willie, not long returned from the pub at the end of the street and none too steady on his legs, opened it, to hear Oscar's voice saying weakly:

"Give me shelter, Willie. Let me lie on the floor or I shall die in the streets."

Stumbling past Willie into a room on the right of the narrow hall, Oscar slumped into a chair, where he sat with eyes closed and his breath coming in short gasps. After learning from Lord Douglas the circumstances which had brought them there, Willie saw him to the waiting cab, and then returned to gaze at the figure of Society's darling; who

upon more than one occasion, he remembered, had taken a high hand with him, recommending him to mend his ways. There was at that moment little sympathy in Willie's feelings toward his brother, though he later described the occasion picturesquely enough:

"He came tapping with his beak against the window-pane, and fell down on my threshold like a wounded stag."

Many abusive things Willic, in his semi-intoxicated state, thought of saying to Oscar. He had mumbled: "Thank God my vices are at least decent!" when there appeared in the doorway the figure of an upright, white-faced old woman with staring eyes, clutching her faded gown to her with hands like delicate claws.

How different, in the dingy gas-light, Lady Wilde looked from the splendidly fantastic hostess whose receptions had been enjoyed by distinguished visitors to that very house, few of whom would have cared to enter it again. But none of her dignity had deserted her, nor would it have been surprising had she repeated what she had so often been overheard to say when complimented upon the choice of a house in Chelsea: "Oh, but I want to live in some high place, Primrose Hill or Highgate, because I was an eagle in my youth!"

A bird in flight she had always been, with her wings spread out towards first one shining ideal, then another. A crazy woman she had been called, and not without a certain truth. Yet because of an integrity she possessed, it was as easy to admire, as to ridicule her. For no matter how flamboyant her gestures, how intellectually ineffective, they were prompted, beyond any doubt whatever, by a warm sincerity that came straight from the heart. And her heart had ever been a large one.

The situation involving her son was not one with which Lady Wilde was unfamiliar, inasmuch as it concerned a scandal in the family. Different as the details of her husband's case were, yet he too had once owed his unenviable position in court to a lack of control over his sexual impulses,

that had resulted in promiscuity of a sort too widespread not to be dangerous. When Sir William Wilde defended himself against the accusation made by one of his women patients, a Miss Mary Travers, that he had seduced her while she was under the influence of chloroform, all Dublin had been thrilled by the sensational allegations levelled at the distinguished surgeon. It had been a vastly complicated case, with a great deal to be said for both sides, and in which for good reasons of their own none of the witnesses had quite told the truth. In the result, however, Miss Travers had been awarded one farthing damages—a verdict which, since it left Sir William with costs to pay amounting to some three thousand pounds, could only mean that he had been grossly overcharged for seducing a woman whose virtue was considered to be worth nothing.

From this blow to his reputation, Sir William had never really recovered, though his decline was slow, so that his friends witnessed the sad spectacle of a man going to seed before his time; one who eventually died because he had no particular wish to live.

At the time of the case Oscar was ten years old, a pupil at Portora Royal School. His mother had done what she could to keep from him all knowledge of the scandal; done her best, too, for her husband; to whom she had behaved always as an understanding, even an indulgent, wife.

"I want to talk to you, Oscar," his mother said now, holding out her hand to him as though he were a small child. He rose slowly from his chair and followed her out of the room. A glance from his mother's flashing eyes told Willie that, devoted as she was to him, his brother had greater need of her for the present. She wished to talk with Oscar alone.

Of what passed between mother and son as they sat together in that house of sorrow in the early hours of the morning, nothing was ever known. Only, from what Oscar repeated afterwards, was it assumed that among other things they had approached the question of whether or not he

should secretly leave the country, and thus escape the ordeal of a second trial, with its possible consequences. But that such dishonourable conduct on his part was in no circumstances to be thought of, was made very plain to those of his friends who in the course of the next few days called at the house to see Oscar. From him they learned of his mother's words, uttered apparently with a vehemence suggesting somehow that the honour of Ireland depended upon her son's behaviour :

"If you stay, even if you go to prison, you will always be my son; it will make no difference to my affection; but if you go I will never speak to you again."

This sentiment of his mother's having fired Willie's imagination no less than his brother's, he said to everyone he met: "Oscar is an Irish Gentleman: he will stay and face the music." To Oscar even, lest he should forget, he said: "You are an Irish Gentleman: you must stay to face the music."

But that he would have the good sense not to behave like a gentleman, of whatever nationality, was the expressed hope of all his friends, none of whom could see any point in his staying to face a second trial. In the event, even, of an acquittal, which was unlikely, too much had already been lost for him ever again to resume his former position in English Society, so that he might just as well, it seemed, cross the Channel at once—as some of his friends had done—and thus avoid the risk of imprisonment.

From the first Lord Douglas had volunteered to make good any loss that the Rev. Stewart Headlam might incur in the event of Wilde breaking his bail, and almost daily there called at the house in Oakley Street sympathisers urging him to sacrifice honour in the interests of logic. Among these was Frank Harris, still fiercely loyal to his friend, and to his own journalistic instinct. Nor was he content merely to give advice; he went the length of providing a practical means of escape, the particulars of which—though without avail, as it happened—he pressed upon Oscar as the two

of them, in the darkness of the night, wandered up and down the pavements of Queens Gate.

It was only to be expected of Harris that he should justify himself by going one better than any of the others. Deeds! not words, was his battle-cry; and the deed he confidently expected Wilde to perform on the spot, without returning to Oakley Street for a toothbrush even, was to dash with him in a fast brougham to a landing place on the Thames, where he had a yacht ready to start for the coast of France at a moment's notice. Not getting the response to this plan that he hoped for, Harris went on to paint in glowing colours a picture of Oscar in the fair land of France, beyond the reach of warrants. This, however, seeming to make little impression, he mentioned the supper he had ordered to be served in the yacht's cabin—lobster à l'Americaine and a bottle of Pommery—but once more he was unsuccessful.

“It is a wonderful idea, Frank. But impossible. Oh, quite impossible!”

“Rubbish! man. Nothing is impossible. Just think, Oscar—tomorrow we shall breakfast at Boulogne, lunch at St. Malo, dine at Sables d'Olonne. What do you say?”

For answer Wilde shook his head. Harris persisted in his arguments. But the other stood firm. He had promised his mother to stay. Nothing would alter his decision.

Listening to Wilde's repeated refusals, and the reasons he advanced for them, it must almost have seemed as if he considered any eventuality preferable to that of having Harris's boisterous companionship forced upon him for an indefinite period.

His mother's dilapidated house, with its threadbare carpets and furnishings, was not one in which Wilde could hope to find either comfort or peace of mind. To add to his distress was the continual presence of Willie, who having appointed himself Oscar's keeper, stood guard over him with the mien of a slightly inebriated watch-dog.

In this melancholy state Wilde was discovered by a disciple of his, who came from Paris to pay his respects to the

fallen idol. This young journalist, who lived in France, was Robert Sherard, and his visit to England at this critical time he saw rather as a mission, undertaken on behalf of the French nation, as an expression of sympathy for the victim of an injustice that only a country as dead intellectually as England would inflict upon one of her poets.

Mr. Sherard had immediately counted himself among Wilde's staunch supporters, but like Frank Harris, he was too much of an egoist not to feel irritated when the object of his sympathy insisted on behaving as the born actor he was; as a man not less sincere in his grief because he chose to interpret it as a protean actor would a tragic rôle.

The man Mr. Sherard found in Oakley Street he later described in language that would not have disgraced Harris, for again like the latter, he possessed the advantage (to himself) of a fertile imagination and a ready pen. And as Harris had done, he begged his friend to flee the country.

"I could not bear life if I were to flee," Wilde said. "I cannot see myself slinking about the Continent, a fugitive from justice"—a confession he made while lying, according to Mr. Sherard, on a small camp bed in one corner of a poorly furnished room that was in great disorder: "In a glass on the mantelpiece was an arum lily, sere and yellow, which drooped lamentably down over his head. His face was flushed and swollen, his voice was broken, he was a man altogether collapsed."

"Why have you not brought me poison from Paris?" Wilde asked his disciple, and, falling in love with the phrase, repeated it at intervals for the rest of the day—*poison* from *Paris*—which repetition got so on Mr. Sherard's nerves that he put a stop to it by somewhat arbitrarily informing the master that prussic acid was as easily procurable in London, as it was in the capital of France.

Chapter Fourteen

It remained for a Jewess to perform the Christian act of rescuing Wilde from his uncongenial surroundings and restoring to him, so far as was possible in the adverse circumstances, a little of the comfort to which he had been accustomed. The sight of the poor man living in conditions that cannot have seemed to him much of an improvement upon those he had experienced in Holloway, and her instinctive knowledge that if he were to do himself justice in court he must be given back something of his self-respect, deeply affected Ada Leverson when she called to see him one morning at Oakley Street.

She suggested that, if he cared to come and stay with them at their house in Courtfield Gardens, she and her husband would be honoured to receive him; a suggestion that, quite apart from the humanity which prompted it, showed Mrs. Leverson to be a courageous woman; for to mention Oscar Wilde's name at this time was to risk one's reputation in good society. Had the knowledge spread that he was sheltering in a certain house, that house would undoubtedly have been damaged by the mob.

To the drawing-room in Courtfield Gardens the servants were summoned by Mr. Leverson, who explained the situation:

"You most of you know Mr. Wilde and have waited upon him. You know now the dreadful thing that has happened to him; you know of what he is accused; you know that he is out on bail. Now your mistress and I would like him to come and stay with us until he is a free man again, but before inviting him I feel it right to ask you to tell me with frankness whether you think you will be able to make him comfortable."

In silence the butler, the cook, the housemaid, the parlour-

maid, the kitchen-maid, and the old nurse who had become Mrs. Leverson's personal maid, exchanged furtive glances. Presently the butler said :

"Well, sir—sir and madam—speaking for myself and I think the rest of us—well, sir, we've most of us read the case, but we know Mr. Wilde, and we have always been proud to wait on him, and proud we shall still be, sir, if I may make so bold—we'll all of us do all we can to make the poor gentleman comfortable."

To ensure, however, that the butler had not overplayed his part in speaking for his colleagues, Mr. Leverson offered any of the servants who wished to leave a month's wages. He added that the coachman was absent because he had been given a holiday, a precaution against his revealing the secret of Mr. Wilde's visit by gossiping too freely in public-houses.

So in a hired brougham, the Sphinx, as Wilde always called Ada Leverson, went to snatch her friend from the uncomfortable bosom of his family, and returning to Courtfield Gardens ensconced him in an apartment consisting of one large room that had once been the nursery, a small bedroom, and a bathroom.

"You would like me," she asked, "to remove the toys?"

"Please leave them, Sphinx," he said.

With a rocking-horse and various dolls and stuffed animals for company, he remained all day in this room where bunny-rabbits chased each other across a blue-and-white frieze, receiving visits from his solicitor and one or two friends. The secret of his presence in that house was as carefully guarded as if he had been an aristocrat in hiding from the guillotine. Until six o'clock he never came downstairs, but punctually at that hour each evening his hostess enjoyed his companionship in her drawing-room for two hours before dinner. Immaculately dressed in evening clothes, a flower in his buttonhole and the scented, gold-tipped cigarette once more drooping from his fingers, he transformed himself, seemingly without effort, into the Lord of Language, if not the King of Life, that he had always considered himself

to be. Not a wave of his hair was out of place, an aged barber arriving at the house each morning to attend to it.

As it happened, another warm-hearted member of the Jewish race was responsible for doing what she could to alleviate Wilde's distress at this time : Adela Schuster, who, upon learning that he was bankrupt, had no money for his defence, and none for his mother, to whose support he had always contributed, sent him a cheque for £1,000. Enclosed was a note saying how entirely inadequate she considered this sum to be as a recognition of the enormous pleasure his conversation had given her in the past.

Adela Schuster spoke no more than the truth. Many would have agreed that the privilege of listening to that richly musical voice improvising stories, or merely commenting wittily upon the pageant of life as he saw it, was beyond price. And listening to him as they sat together in her drawing-room each evening, when for her sake he insisted upon behaving as if nothing had occurred to disturb his 'beautiful life', Ada Leverson saw for the last time the man as he actually was : the child-like lover of fun, the gay irresponsible Irishman, who was about to be transformed by public opinion into a sinister figure ; a creature entirely mythical, for future generations to revile, shake their heads over, or extol—each according to his taste.

Constance called to see her husband. She came down from the nursery in tears after being with him for more than two hours. Mrs. Leverson took her in her arms and tried to comfort the unhappy wife. Presently Constance dried her tears and said :

"My solicitors tell me that if Oscar does not leave the country he will be ruined. That is the message I have brought him. For all our sakes, I told him—he should go. But it's no use. He simply will not hear of it."

"Did he give you any reason for not wanting to go?" Ada Leverson asked.

"His mother tells him it would be dishonourable. That is all he will say." She shook her head, half in disbelief. "I

no longer understand him. For some time now he has been, I think, a little mad. . . .”

Constance looked beseechingly at the other woman; recognised someone more worldly-wise than herself, and wondered if she might not have some influence with her obstinate husband. “Perhaps if you were to speak to him? . . .”

When Constance had gone, Ada Leverson thought over what she should do. Had she any right to put in a word? What made it so awkward was that she and Oscar had mutually agreed to avoid a discussion of the case, or anything connected with it. Yet when she recalled how poor Constance had looked, the note of anguish in her plea, she sat down and wrote a short note to her guest, which she asked the butler to take up to him.

In the note she merely suggested that perhaps it might not be a bad thing for him to take his wife’s advice.

She received no reply to her note. But when, on the stroke of six, Wilde entered the drawing-room, he returned it to her, saying gently: “That is not like you, Sphinx”; after which, with a smile, he talked of other things.

Telling stories that often he made up as he went along afforded him as much pleasure as it did his listeners. It was so much less trouble to talk than to write. Writing tales was a wearisome business carried on in the loneliness of a study, telling them was like sharing a confidence with a friend. How perfectly delightful, too, to watch your listener’s face, and judge from his expression just how much he believed of what you told him!

“Did I ever tell you, Sphinx, about my Aunt Jane?”

“Never, Oscar.”

Had he done so already, she would not have let him know. In point of fact she had learned from others how wistfully impressive, as he told it, the story of Oscar’s Aunt Jane was. She might even have had the story repeated to her in essence. But if so, she had forgotten it. Besides, Oscar’s stories told by anyone else were not at all the same thing.

Even when written down by himself they lacked something of the verisimilitude and emotional warmth that his voice always gave to them.

"Poor Aunt Jane was very old and very, very proud, and she lived all alone in a splendid, desolate old house in County Tipperary. No neighbours ever called on Aunt Jane and, had they done so, she would not have been pleased to see them. She would not have liked them to see the grass-grown drives of the demesne, the house with its faded chintzes and suites of shuttered rooms, and herself, no longer a toast and beauty, no more a power in the countryside, but a lonely old woman who had outlived her day.

"And from year to year she sat alone in her twilight, knowing nothing of what passed in the world without. But one winter, even Aunt Jane became aware of a stir in the air, a wave of excitement sweeping over the neighbourhood. The New people were coming into the New house on the hill and were going to give a great Ball, the like of which had never been seen. The Ryans were enormously rich and—"Ryans?" said Aunt Jane. "I don't know the Ryans. Where do they come from?" Then the blow fell. The Ryans came from nowhere in particular and were reported on good authority to be 'in business'.

"'But,' said Aunt Jane, 'what are the poor creatures thinking of? Who will go to their Ball?' 'Everybody will go,' Aunt Jane was assured. 'Everybody has accepted. It will be a wonderful affair.'

"When Aunt Jane fully realised this her wrath was terrible. This is what things had come to in the neighbourhood then—and it was her fault. It had been for her to lead; she had brooded in her tent when she should have been up and doing battle. And then Aunt Jane made her great resolve.

"*She* would give a Ball—a Ball the like of which had never been imagined: she would re-enter Society and show how a *grande dame* of the old school could entertain. If the County had so far forgotten itself, she herself would rescue it from these impertinent interlopers.

"And instantly she set to work. The old house was repainted, refurnished, the grounds replanted; the supper and the band were ordered from London and an army of waiters engaged. Everything should be of the best—there should be no question of cost. All should be paid for; Aunt Jane would devote the rest of her life to the paying; but now money was nothing—she spent with both hands.

"At last the great night arrived. The demesne was lit for two miles with coloured lamps, the hall and staircase were gorgeous with flowers, the dancing-floor smooth and shining as a mirror.

"The bandsmen were in their places and bowed deeply as Aunt Jane, in a splendid gown and blazing with diamonds, descended in state and stood at the ballroom door.

"There she waited. Time went on, the footmen in the hall, the waiters in the supper-room, began to look at each other, the band tuned up two or three times to show its zeal, but no guests arrived.

"And Aunt Jane, in her beautiful gown, waited at the ballroom door. Eleven—twelve—half-past twelve.

"Aunt Jane swept a deep curtsy to the band. 'Pray go and have your supper,' she said. 'No one is coming.'

"Then she went upstairs and died. That is to say, she never again spoke a word and was dead in three days. And not for some considerable time after her death was it discovered that Aunt Jane had quite forgotten to send out any invitations."

On the last night of his stay in her house, Wilde asked his hostess to put a sleeping-draught by his bed.

"Not to take," he said. "But its presence there will have a magical effect."

In the hall next morning, before departing in a cab to surrender to his bail, he turned impulsively towards her :

"If the worst comes to the worst, Sphinx, you'll write me?"

Chapter Fifteen

THE closing scene of Wilde's second trial produced in those present a feeling of compassion, or of loathing, for the bent figure in the dock; to whom Mr. Justice Wills addressed himself as follows :

"Oscar Wilde, the crime of which you have been convicted is so bad that one has to put stern restraint upon one's self to prevent one's self from describing, in language which I would rather not use, the sentiments which must rise to the breast of every man of honour who has heard the details of these two terrible trials. That the jury have arrived at a correct verdict in this case I cannot persuade myself to entertain a shadow of doubt; and I hope, at all events, that those who sometimes imagine that a judge is half-hearted in the cause of decency and morality because he takes care no prejudice shall enter into the case, may see that it is consistent with the utmost sense of indignation at the horrible charges brought home to you.

"It is no use for me to address you. People who can do these things must be dead to all sense of shame, and one cannot hope to produce any effect upon them. It is the worst case I have ever tried. That you, Wilde, have been the centre of a circle of extensive corruption of the most hideous kind among young men, it is impossible to doubt.

"I shall, under the circumstances, be expected to pass the severest sentence that the law allows. In my judgment it is totally inadequate for such a case as this. The sentence of this court is that you be imprisoned and kept to hard labour for two years."

The faint murmur of dissent which rose to greet this pronouncement was at once drowned by a general buzz of approval. Swaying a little, the figure in the dock—described

by an eye-witness as looking, with his purple lips and sweating forehead, like a massive bull in the agony of death—clutched the rail in front of him and attempted to speak. But no words came to his aid, and at a whispered order from one of the warders beside him, he moved to the stairway leading to the cells below.

In the streets outside the Old Bailey the verdict was welcomed with marked approval by several prostitutes who lifted their skirts and danced madly. "E'll 'ave 'is 'air cut reglar *now*!" yelled one of them, a sally which brought forth coarse laughter from her colleagues, all of whom were no doubt somewhat elated by the removal of a threat to their business.

Whatever refinement of torture a man may suffer afterwards, nothing can more acutely impress upon him the level to which he has sunk than the humiliation he is forced to undergo directly the prison gates close upon him. To someone of sensitivity and imagination, to whom cleanliness and privacy, apart from anything else, are things taken for granted, the experience is nothing less than a manifestation of hell upon earth. It is the hour such a man never wholly recovers from; in which he is told to strip that his nakedness may be crudely examined in public before it is put into a shapeless garment stamped with the government's mark, and he is thereafter ordered about with less civility than if he were a beast of burden.

For Wilde, his reception at Wandsworth was like the passing of a man from a patch of bright sunlight into eternal shadow. He would never again be thought of as the person he had always been; and still was. In the minds of all who heard his name henceforth he would be associated as much with the convict as with the man of letters. Even those unfamiliar with his works, would know him for the sins he had committed.

It would have been unnatural for him not to want to die during the first weeks of his imprisonment. With his life in

ruins about him, sitting in a cell or shuffling round the asphalt ring of the exercise yard, he was terrified all the time of what might be done to him next. A pitiful figure he cut in his drab prison clothes, with his head cropped and great clumsy boots on his feet. After the rich food he had been used to the pieces of gristly meat floating in thin gruel, the eight-ounce brown loaves, and the mugs of impossible tea, disgusted him—until sheer hunger overcame his distaste. In time he came even to breathe without noticing the mingled stench of unwashed bodies and carbolic that at first had made his stomach retch.

He was subjected to conditions so unnatural to him that he might have been existing in another world; a grimly silent, colourless world, whose inhabitants were made to labour for long hours at useless tasks. A world in which to break, no matter how unintentionally, the rules imposed to maintain a rigid discipline, was to earn some added punishment designed to weaken whatever power of resistance the offender possessed.

The fingers that once had used a pen to such amusing purpose were now blunted and sore from picking oakum, or driving a needle through the pieces of heavy canvas that were tossed to him for conversion into mail bags. After turning the crank and scrubbing the stone floors, his previously pampered limbs ached all over and he wished at nights that he might go to sleep and not wake up again. But sleep was difficult to come by on a plank-bed that a thin mattress did little to soften.

To know that he had only himself to blame for what had come to pass, made his punishment the harder to bear.

"I blame myself without reserve for my weakness," he repeated to himself a hundred times a day. "It was merely weakness. But in the case of an artist, weakness is nothing less than a crime, when it is weakness that paralyses the imagination."

Unctuously the prison chaplain said to the victim of his pious attentions :

"Mr. Wilde, did you have morning prayers at your house?"

"I am sorry . . . I fear not."

"And see where you are now!"

This brief homily summed up an attitude of mind adopted by England, that was responsible for the other European nations, at least in theory, sympathising with Wilde. If none of them particularly approved of his morals, all of them strongly disapproved of Britannia; in their eyes an interfering old woman, far too wealthy for their liking, and sated with complacency. If by supporting one of her sons against her they were able to express the contempt they felt for her middle-class fatuity, so much the better.

The doctor was no more understanding than the chaplain. He refused to believe one morning that Wilde felt too ill to leave his cell.

"You're malingering, that's what the matter is with you," he said. "Get up now, unless you want to be punished."

Dragging himself to his feet, the prisoner just managed to get his clothes on, to shuffle with the others into chapel. But once there he fainted, falling with a crash to the stone floor. In falling his ear suffered an injury from which, through lack of proper attention, it never wholly recovered.

The morning on which, for the first time since his arrival at Wandsworth, a voice spoke to him that was not the stern voice of a warder giving a command, was one that he never afterwards forgot. For the voice warmed and uplifted his heart. He was tramping round the asphalt ring on exercise, when he heard the words, and could not be sure at first whether they came from the man in front of him, or the one behind. A trick he had not yet learned, but which the other convicts practised with the proficiency of trained ventriloquists, was that of speaking without moving the lips. In this way they were able to communicate and at the same time avoid the detection that would have resulted in their being punished for breaking the rule of strict silence.

The words Wilde had heard were these :

"I'm sorry for you; it is harder for the likes of you than it is for the likes of us."

To which, after some hesitation, he replied under his breath:

"No, my friend, we all suffer alike."

Each day after that a few remarks were surreptitiously exchanged between them. To have found a friend in this dreadful place, someone who did not despise and reject him, was for the prisoner a very wonderful thing. In the surrounding gloom it was a tiny spark of hope. But a spark quickly to be extinguished. An alert young warder one morning noticed Wilde's lips moving. At once he reported him.

It might have struck the Governor as somewhat ironical that the man standing dejectedly before him on a charge of muttering a few words out of the side of his mouth, was in the estimation of Society—not excluding the Prince of Wales himself—the most brilliant talker of the day. And reflecting upon this, as well as upon the fact that Oscar Wilde, being a stranger to the establishment, had not yet had time to accustom himself to its rules, he could have considered letting the prisoner off with a caution. To entertain either of these ideas, however, the Governor would have needed to be a man of some intelligence and humanity. Being neither of these things, he ordered the prisoner to undergo twenty-four hours solitary confinement on a diet of bread and water.

No matter how repulsive a creature they may have thought him, few men, with the exception of Queensberry and his cronies, could have wished such punishment to be inflicted upon Wilde. Though what is done to offenders once they have been put away, the supplementary cruelties to which their carcasses are treated by those directly in charge of them is something the public has not time to concern itself with.

In the suffocating stillness of his punishment-cell he was more than ever thrown back upon himself; crushed by the catastrophe that he could never for a moment escape from.

Too late he learned what a separation from his children meant, how much dearer to him they were than he had ever realised. The trust they had shown in him as babies when on all fours he had taken them for rides round the nursery floor; their arms about his neck and their sleepy heads against his shoulder as he carried them off to bed; the wide-eyed interest with which, as small boys, they had listened to the stories he read them from books or made up as he went along: the memory of these occasions, all the joy that they recalled, was made so painful by the knowledge of their loss, that he tried to banish them by making his mind a blank.

"Are you going to cease writing obscene and beastly letters to my wife?" Lord Douglas of Hawick asked his father, coming upon him by chance in Piccadilly on the afternoon immediately following Wilde's committal to prison.

Queensberry glared savagely at his son, as if he could with pleasure have spat in his face. But at the same time he maintained a morose silence; which obstinate attitude caused the other to step in front of his father in order to prevent him from moving on until he had answered his question. He answered it by, without warning, striking his son violently under the left eye. Dropping his umbrella, Lord Hawick struck back. After which blows were freely exchanged for some seconds.

The sight of two gentlemen, obviously belonging to the upper classes, furiously engaged in a bout of fisticuffs, at once attracted a crowd of interested spectators. Soon a couple of policemen arrived upon the scene—the pavement outside the Berkeley Hotel—and having with some difficulty separated the combatants, asked them who they were and what the quarrel was about.

"I am the Marquess of Queensberry, and this is a so-called son of mine."

"I am Lord Douglas of Hawick."

"Yes, that is Lord Douglas of Hawick and the —— is a so-called son of mine."

To a request from the police that he should not create a breach of the peace, Lord Douglas, his temper now thoroughly roused, replied that the matter could only be settled in one way. He asked to be taken immediately before a magistrate, in order to claim protection from the filthy insults to which his father was subjecting the entire family.

In the meantime the Marquess had continued his way along Piccadilly, where in a few seconds he was overtaken by his son.

"Will you or will you not," demanded Lord Douglas, "cease to write obscene letters to my wife?"

Queensberry struck out again, and a further scuffle ensued. Finally they were taken into custody, and at Vine Street charged with causing a disturbance in Piccadilly. At the police station the Marquess, after signing for his appearance in court the following morning, declared his willingness to fight his son any time, for the sum of ten thousand pounds.

Prior to this *fracas*, Queensberry had given his eldest son good reason to detest his father. By every post letters had arrived vilifying him for his support of Bosie, of whom he now spoke as 'that gilt soul whose rose-leaf lips are made for the madness of kissing'. And his son no longer replying to his letters, he had addressed himself to his daughter-in-law, referring to her husband sarcastically as The Great Lord of Hawick. He had gone so far as to accuse them both of sheltering Wilde when he was on bail :

". . . As for O.W. I can wait for his fresh trial. No jury will then acquit him, though individuals may be bribed again to get a disagreement. Who found the money, I wonder, before? The Great Lord of Hawick, I wonder; verily birds of a feather flock together. If I had to kill the fellow, I should in my own mind be perfectly justified, for the mischief he has already done, but can await events. Morally he is dead already. I hope he is still enjoying the madness of

kissing boys and young men, but if with you still, will hardly dare show his nose outside your gates. I guessed he was with you, and when I came down, found out he had been seen at your station with the Great Lord of Hawick, naturally concluded he had gone on to you. Was I mistaken?"

Such was the warped state of Queensberry's mind that nothing would rid him of his obsession. That Wilde was now performing in prison the heavy labour to which common felons were put, was not enough to satisfy him. He had to find some fresh means of adding to the victory he had won; devise a further humiliation for his victim. And this he did by constituting himself the petitioning creditor in Wilde's bankruptcy.

His claim was for £677 in respect of the law costs awarded at the conclusion of the debtor's unsuccessful libel action against him. Not that the loss of this sum could seriously have inconvenienced the Marquess, who at the Orleans Club had been heard openly to declare that if the case had cost him £20,000 he would have considered the money thoroughly well spent, such enjoyment, delight, and triumph had he extracted out of it all. And now, to crown everything, he would have the immense satisfaction not only of having put his enemy into prison for two years, but of taking him out of it for a day; a day on which he would be pronounced a public insolvent before those who had come to gloat over the fallen idol.

Directly after his sentence the bailiffs had walked into Wilde's house in Tite Street and taken possession. To settle outstanding debts, the things he had loved to surround himself with—his Whistler drawings, his Monticelli, his china, his collection of presentation volumes from Swinburne, Whitman, Mallarmé, and other poets of his acquaintance—had been sold and disbanded for ever. For the want of a sum of money no larger than one of his plays could have earned in a few weeks, he was financially ruined. But then no play of Wilde's was being performed in that or any other week.

Earlier in the year, on the night of January 3rd, his comedy *An Ideal Husband* had opened at the Theatre Royal, Haymarket; and been applauded by the Prince of Wales sitting in a box. Congratulated by him afterwards, the author had mentioned that some cuts were needed as the play was too long. "Pray do not take out a single word," said the Prince, whose presence set a seal upon the play's instantaneous success. Even more triumphant, a few weeks later, was the opening night of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, when each epigram as it fell from the actor's lips was greeted with uproarious delight by an ecstatic audience. And at each subsequent performance the reception was the same.

Yet when the seamier side of their brilliant author's private life had come to light, there was nothing for it but to withdraw both his plays from the public view. For it was not to be expected that the most amusing epigram, one that before had produced gusts of laughter every time it was uttered, would raise even a smile when its creator's strange conduct was recalled.

Playgoers would without a qualm have patronised a play written by a man who had seduced a dozen innocent servant girls, thereby burdening society with a dozen bastards. But to visit a play written by a man who had enjoyed the embraces of a few young rascals on the make, all of whom were well able to look after themselves, was unthinkable.

So along the dreary corridor of the Bankruptcy Court, handcuffed and with head bowed, the convict was marched by two policemen; an exhibit devoured by the crowd, to whom few spectacles are more fascinating than that of a man publicly degraded. It was for Wilde an experience as bitter as any he had yet had to endure. But at the very moment when, about to enter the Registrar's Courtroom, his emotions might have got the better of him, an incident occurred to give him back a little of his lost self-respect. In the crowd a man gravely raised his hat to him, a gesture whose simplicity and sweetness was not lost upon the others.

"Men have gone to heaven for smaller things than that," thought Wilde. "It was in this spirit, and with this mode of love, that the saints knelt down to wash the feet of the poor, or stooped to kiss the leper on the cheek."

He had need this day of something to believe in, a philosophy to support him in his shame and wretchedness. But fearful though the ordeal was of facing his creditors as a debtor described as 'late of 16 Tite Street, Chelsea, and now of Her Majesty's Prison, Wandsworth', it was nothing to the anguish he was to suffer only twenty-four hours later; on the platform of a suburban railway station. Of his transference from Wandsworth to Reading Gaol, he afterwards wrote :

On November 13th, 1895, I was brought down here from London. From two o'clock to half-past two on that day I had to stand on the centre platform of Clapham Junction in convict dress, and handcuffed, for the world to look at. I had been taken out of the hospital ward without a moment's notice being given to me. Of all possible objects I was the most grotesque. When people saw me they laughed. Each train as it came up swelled the audience. Nothing could exceed their amusement. That was, of course, before they knew who I was. As soon as they had been informed they laughed still more. For half an hour I stood there in the November rain surrounded by a jeering mob. For a year after that was done to me I wept every day at the same hour and for the same space of time.

For a burglar, an embezzler, or indeed any professional criminal, such an exposure in the pillory must have been less painful to sustain than it was for an artist of Wilde's imaginative temperament. Yet in the end his imagination, in its over-abundant fertility, probably saved his reason: the idea he conceived, standing on the platform, that his forage cap was a crown of thorns, his drab cape a purple robe.

Chapter Sixteen

A PRISONER is in some ways dependent upon the friends visiting him, most of whom sincerely believe that they know what will be best for him in the future. But human nature being what it is, the decisions they arrive at concerning his welfare sometimes suit their own convenience quite as much as they suit his. He does not, however, quarrel with their advice, being only too grateful to them for not deserting him in his hour of need. Nor is he inclined to doubt the veracity of the tidings they bring him from outside: those morsels of news he turns over and over in his mind after they have left him, making of them what he will.

Among the friends visiting Wilde in prison were men dominated by their feminine instincts; none more so than faithful Robbie Ross. His was a jealous disposition where the emotions were concerned, and in thinking how he might best serve the interests of his master, he was not unmindful of the interests nearest to his own heart.

A dear fellow, Robbie; gentle almost to the point of timidity, yet a fellow not above using his delicate little claws when the occasion seemed propitious, and the risk not too dangerous.

First through the prison gates was Robbie, full to the brim with solicitude, wise counsel, and news of what was happening in the great world. Busy as a bee, he was seeing to this, putting that to rights; doing his utmost to create a feeling of goodwill and understanding between Wilde and the friends from whom he was separated. But this kindly service did not extend to the inclusion of Bosie Douglas, for here the go-between's tender passion came into play; whence he was able to persuade himself that

circumstances allowed him, by shifting the picture a little out of focus, and slightly doctoring the truth, to present the facts as he would wish his friend to see them, rather than as they were.

Was he to be blamed for not, when asked by Wilde what had become of Bosie, giving him a simple answer? Blamed for distorting, by subtle innuendo, the young man's behaviour, until it was made to appear that Bosie had deserted Wilde, or at any rate forgotten him for the time being?

Before blaming Robbie for misrepresenting the facts, one would have had to accept him as a normal male person; which he was not. Calculated on such a level, his evasions could not have seemed other than despicable. But as the behaviour of a female—one, moreover, jealous of her rival's influence over the Master—it scarcely called for serious criticism; since a woman scorned is by common consent allowed her meed of fury.

"Bosie," said Robbie, with studied casualness, "is in Capri. He has a villa there. It's his intention, I believe, later to move to Paris."

How careful he was not to mention that Bosie's sojourn abroad was forced upon him by his mother. (Lady Queensberry had stipulated that in the event of his returning to England before the scandal had died down, she would cut off his allowance.) Careful, too, not to mention a little matter he was hoping to negotiate, whereby Mrs. Wilde would make a small financial settlement upon her husband when he came out of prison—strictly on the understanding that he never again took up his residence with Bosie.

Not if he could help it was Robbie going to allow the tempestuously beautiful Bosie, with his arrogance, his grace, and his undoubted poetic talent, to regain an ascendancy over him. He himself might be plain to look at, uncreative, even a trifle dull when it came to comparisons; but for all that he meant to prove, by one means or another, that Wilde's best friend, at any time, was Robert Ross.

Languishing in Holloway before the outcome of events had resolved itself, Wilde had seen the chief actors in the drama through very different eyes. Bosie he had cast as the lover faithful unto death, from whose divine companionship others, in their ignorance and stupidity, were seeking to wrest him. He had lived then for Bosie's daily visits, telling himself that no matter what came to pass, the world was well lost for love; conveniently forgetting that the fun he had indulged in with stable lads was principally the cause of his downfall.

But seen now through a convict's eyes, which all day rested upon grey stone walls and the grey men they enclosed, and at night could find no solace in sleep but stared into blackness, the loved one sporting himself on the sunlit rocks of Capri, or floating dreamily on the surface of its wonderfully blue waters, was anything but a welcome vision.

That the angelic Bosie might not, after all, be worth the sacrifice he had made for him, first suggested itself to the unhappy prisoner after a visit paid him by Robert Sherard; the journalist who had elected himself Wilde's chief disciple in Paris. This young enthusiast, prone always to flights of exaggeration, declared that Bosie was about to publish all his letters from Wilde in the *Mercure de France*. It was not really true, as Sherard might have discovered had he taken the trouble.

Douglas intended to include in an article he was writing to defend his friend, a few of the letters Wilde had written him while he was shut up in Holloway; letters whose nobly expressed sentiments were likely to have enlisted some public sympathy for their distressed author; anyway in France. Unaware of the true facts, however, and recalling the disaster wrought by other letters he had sent to Bosie in the past, Wilde gave instructions that his correspondence was on no account to be printed; instructions which Robbie, as soon as he received them, passed on to the right quarter with an inward glow of triumph.

Nor had Wilde forgotten an incident which occurred some weeks before his removal from Wandsworth to Reading: one that at the time had caused him merely to laugh ironically to himself, but which, taken in conjunction with what he now learned of Bosie's activities, helped to build in his oppressed mind a singularly unattractive picture of his erstwhile lover. It was the picture not of an impetuous youth known in any case to be the possessor of an undisciplined temperament, but of a betrayer selling for the delectation of a scandal-loving public his friend's most intimate secrets.

The incident at Reading had come about when Queensberry's lawyers arrived to serve upon Wilde a bankruptcy notice for £700, their costs in the case against their client which he had lost. While taking the prisoner's depositions and statements, a solicitor's clerk bent towards him across the table and, to avoid the warder who was present overhearing, murmured :

"Prince Fleur de Lys wishes to be remembered to you."

Uncomprehendingly, Wilde stared at the man, who thereupon repeated the message with which he had been entrusted. This still having no effect, he added :

"The gentleman is abroad at present."

At last it dawned upon the prisoner from whom the message came, and had he dared to laugh aloud, his laugh would have been full of scorn. Prince Fleur de Lys indeed ! How little the tragic events of the past few months had mattered to Bosie, who in his own eyes remained the elegant prince in a fairy-tale, untouched by any awareness of the catastrophe he had helped to precipitate.

"It would be more to the point," Wilde could not help reflecting, "if Fleur de Lys's family paid the costs of my case against the Marquess. It was the understanding upon which, in the first place, I agreed to prosecute."

Prince Fleur de Lys ! Each time he recalled the title it made him smile grimly. He himself was not allowed even

an assumed name. A letter and two numerals sufficiently identified him in the world to which he now belonged. The insignia 'C.3.3.' stamped on his coarse clothing meant that he was always to be found at home in the third cell, on the third landing, of C.Hall, in Reading Gaol.

The assurance, given to those who petitioned the Home Secretary to show him some consideration, that at Reading he would be treated less severely than at Wandsworth, proved to be without foundation. For the Governor at Reading was a certain Colonel Isaacson, an unimaginative martinet of a man, whose ruthlessness, in keeping his staff and their charges up to the mark, earned him the fear and hatred of both. He chose to make no allowances for the little breaches of discipline that anyone as unused to prison routine as Wilde was, could hardly be expected to avoid. He made a point, rather, of inflicting upon him, for the most trivial offence, the maximum punishment.

"They treat me cruelly," Wilde whispered to his friends when they saw him. "Can nothing be done?"

An unexpected visitor came to see him early in 1896. Constance had been far from well. She need not have endured the discomfort of the long journey from Genoa, where she had been staying with friends. But the affection for her husband that survived all the suffering he had caused her, would not allow her to contemplate the idea of anyone but herself breaking to him the sad news. From her own lips, as gently as possible, she told him that his mother had died.

Immeasurably touched by her kindness, the tears came into his eyes. In that moment he would have liked, had he been allowed, to take her in his arms and think of her once more as the girl in whose honour he had written long ago:

For if of these fallen petals
One to you seem fair,
Love will waft it till it settles
On your hair.

And when wind and winter harden
All the loveless land,
It will whisper of the garden,
You will understand.

To Robbie, after she had gone, he wrote saying how good to him she had been; how gentle and kind. He felt the wrong he had done her and his children to be so great, that he had no right to go against her wishes in anything. He had full trust in her, he said.

But in the end it is not his reflections upon the past, nor his forebodings as to the future, which chiefly occupies a convict's mind. His concern is with the present. His friends, if he has any, are the men in prison with him, and the warders in whose charge he is. And no matter how grandiose the schemes with which he has been accustomed to deal in the world outside, here he takes as intense an interest, and devotes himself as untiringly, to schemes which, small as they must appear to the man who enjoys his freedom, to the convict are matters of paramount importance : matters, for instance, affecting the attainment of a little something extra to eat, a pair of boots that fit, or a sympathetic smile.

No one with Wilde's natural charm, good-nature, and sense of humour, could fail to make himself liked by some with whom he came into contact. After a little practice he became an expert in the art of speaking without moving his lips, and as not always the same men exercised with him in the yard each morning, he was able in time to communicate with a wide circle of acquaintances.

With those of his warders who were human beings he chatted frequently; and by so doing passed the monotonous hours as agreeably for them as for himself. His superior intellect earned him the respect of more than a few of those whose unpleasant duty it was to lock him in his cell at night, and supervise his manual labours at all hours of the day.

"You cannot imagine," said Wilde after his release, "how much good it did me in Prison that my play *Salome* was being played in Paris just then. In prison it had been entirely forgotten that I was a literary person; but when they saw that my play was a success in Paris, they said to one another, 'Well, but this is strange; he has talent, then.'

His talent was always at the disposal of one or two warders, enthusiastic followers of competitions in the newspapers; and among the rewards he helped to secure for them were a silver tea service and a grand piano. Conversation with these rough simple men he found infinitely preferable to the platitudinous utterances of the doctor and the Chaplain when they paid him an unwanted visit.

"Excuse me, sir," a warder interested in novels said, "but Marie Corelli: would she be considered a great writer, sir?"

With the utmost seriousness, Wilde replied:

"Now don't think I have anything against her *moral* character, but from the way she writes *she ought to be here.*"

Humanity will find its expression no matter how unfavourable the circumstances, and the kindness shown to Wilde by one of the warders, he never afterwards forgot; though at the time it all but resulted in a misunderstanding between them.

Wilde felt so ill on waking one morning that the warder, disregarding the rules at the risk of getting himself into serious trouble, went to make him some hot beef-tea, which he knew would do him good. But returning to the cell with the hot bottle hidden under his shirt, he ran into the Chief Warder; who held him in conversation for some minutes, during which time the bottle, pressed against his skin, caused him such agony that it was as much as he could do not to yell with pain. When, having eventually got away, he told Wilde what had happened, the latter burst out laughing; which coming on top of the poor man's sufferings so much upset him—seeming a poor return for the trouble he had

gone to—that he went out and slammed the door behind him. Returning an hour later with breakfast, he was told by the now contrite prisoner that unless he forgave him, he would not touch his meal.

“Not even the cocoa?” said the man.

“Not even the cocoa.”

“Well, rather than starve you, I’ll forgive you.”

“And supposing I laugh again?”

“I shan’t forgive you again.”

A warder named Martin was his particular friend, and through him Wilde performed small services for some of the other prisoners. He was always passing him little notes. When some children were brought in for poaching rabbits, he was determined to procure their freedom.

“Please, dear friend,” he wrote to Martin, “do this for me. I must get them out. Think what a thing for me it would be to be able to help three little children. If I can do this by paying the fine, tell the children that they are to be released tomorrow by a friend and ask them to be happy and not to tell anyone.”

Always the sight of children and lunatics in prison upset him dreadfully. Seeing in their presence such an unforgivable example of cruelty he could not easily retain his faith in the essential goodness of mankind. When prisoners were punished, flogged sometimes for acts of indiscipline, he had the greatest difficulty in restraining an hysterical outburst. More and more the futility and injustice of the system—which he attributed to a total lack of imagination on the part of those who controlled it—impressed itself upon him, until he was convinced, for the time being anyway, that his aim in life should henceforth be directed towards the enlightenment of the official mind.

At exercise one morning Wilde noticed the sad, set features of a new young prisoner who was too far away for him to communicate with. This man, he learned afterwards, was a trooper in the Royal Horse Guards; his name was Charles Thomas Wooldridge. The young soldier’s story

when he heard it moved him so compassionately that he forgot his own in thinking of another's sufferings.

In the ordinary course of events he would scarcely have paid much attention to—if indeed he had noticed at all, as he turned the pages of his *Times* at breakfast—the paragraph which contained Trooper Wooldridge's pitiful story. Formerly he had interested himself only in the behaviour of persons high up in the social scale; dukes whose impulse, when confronted with proof of a wife's unchastity, was to dismiss the lapse with a pointed epigram. But very different from these sybarites of passion was the young trooper who walked near Wilde round the asphalt ring in the early morning, looking wistfully up at the sky. His moral code admitted no compromise. Instead of an epigram, he had used a knife.

Laura Ellen Glendell, his wife's maiden name had been when Wooldridge married her, and by that name she had chosen still to be known during her husband's absence from home; passing herself off as a single woman—for who knows what flighty purpose? None of her colleagues in the post office at Eton where she worked guessed that she was a married woman. They learned it first when they read that she had been met by her husband on the road between the Great Western Railway station at Windsor and the village of Clewer. For on that spot, in a fit of jealousy, he had cut her throat.

Watching the young guardsman as he walked among the men awaiting trial, Wilde was haunted by the thought of what his ingnomorious end must be. And when, after he was sentenced to death, the man was removed from his sight, he followed him in his imagination to the condemned cell.

It is the custom, on the morning when a man is hanged, to keep the other prisoners locked in their cells; lest, affected by their nearness to the gallows, and the knowledge that one of their number is dangling from it, they should decide suddenly to run amuck and overpower their keepers. And on the morning of the 7th of July 1896—the one on

which Wooldridge was executed—Wilde was stirred emotionally as he had never been in his life before. He felt that if only they would allow him materials to write with he could express himself to some purpose; put down in the form of an epic poem, perhaps, the tragic drama he had been forced to witness in silence, that was greater even than his own.

With the arrival of Major Nelson to replace Colonel Isaacson as governor of the prison, Wilde's lot was made a great deal easier. In fact the sympathetic Major raised no objection to his request for materials to write with.

What he wrote, however, was not an epic poem, but a letter of inordinate length addressed to Bosic. A letter which in the opinion of many persons had better not have been written at all.

Chapter Seventeen

YET what business was it of anyone's to whom Wilde addressed his letter, or how he expressed 'himself in it? Future generations were to find in it many faults, at sight of which they threw up their hands in horror, asking themselves how a man could bring himself to engage in such an outpouring of blasphemies, indiscretions, purple passages, and self-pitying whimpers.

What future generations were inclined to forget was that this letter had been conceived as a private communication between two intimates; not as a document inviting the interest and comment of a vast number of readers. They forgot, too, perusing at their leisure its pages once they had got into print, the situation of the man who originally wrote them in prison ink: the convict in his cell suddenly granted an outlet for his pent-up feelings. Unable himself to shoulder the full responsibility for the débâcle, a scapegoat had to be called in to assist him, and conveniently his evil genius was at hand for this purpose. Had Bosie stood inside the cell, Wilde would sooner have told him to his face what he thought of him, than have laboriously written it all down. But lacking this opportunity, he used the only means in his power for citing his friend as the architect of the dismal ruin his life had become.

This Epistle to Bosie, which when completed attained the length of a short novel, was written on eighty closely-written pages, on twenty folio sheets of blue prison paper, each stamped with the Royal Arms. The prisoner was allowed one sheet at a time only. When this was filled a warder removed it and brought another; as if his charge were a pupil in some kindergarten whom it was feared might waste his materials if they were not severely rationed.

Between the commencement and the end of the letter the writer's tone changed with the frequency and suddenness of the wind; rising at times to a fury of inflamed accusation; petering out as quickly in a splutter of fearful recriminations. The purpose of his letter, Wilde made very clear to Bosie, was to wound his vanity to the quick.

As the pen scratched its way over the blue paper there fell from it the whole story of an ill-fated and most lamentable friendship, as seen by the man for whom it had ended in ruin and public infamy. Time and again he blamed himself—for allowing an intellectual friendship entirely to dominate his life; and as often he returned to the charge that Bosie's evil influence had sought to destroy his work.

Was it gentlemanly of Wilde not only to remember the amount of money he had spent on Bosie during their time together, but also to remind him of the same? It may not have been. But then Wilde was no longer in a world where the niceties of good form counted for much: he was a man in prison, starved of everything, who could not help comparing his own miserable lot with that of the young man enjoying himself—if Robbie was to be believed—on the Continent.

Having so recently gone item by item through his past expenditure with the Bankruptcy Receiver, he had clearly in mind the details of what Bosie's friendship had cost him. A day in London for the two of them, for luncheon, dinner, supper, amusements, and hansom, had run away with anything up to £20; and a week's expenses were naturally in proportion.

If he blamed himself, he blamed Bosie more; which was not an unnatural thing for a man to do who, like so many before him, has allowed himself to be seduced by the attractions of youth. He should, he said, have shaken Bosie out of his life as a man shakes from his raiment a thing that has stung him.

But not the whole of this incredible letter, which began

and ended as a sermon intended for Bosie's earnest consumption, was occupied with mundane references to Wilde's injudicious association with him. In many passages the story of their calamitous friendship was wafted on to an exalted plane; the result partly of Wilde having, for want of other books, made a particularly close study of the Bible in his cell; and partly of his fertile imagination: a fertility which in this instance somewhat over-reached itself. Indeed it led him to discover a striking parallel between Christ's betrayal by Judas, and his own by Bosie.

That Wilde's experience bore not the slightest resemblance to Christ's—which from the beginning was deliberately sought, whereas his own came about through mere mischance—was really of not much consequence. The myth he deluded himself with served to raise his lowered spirits; and to inspire, even, passages of prose that gave his letter sufficient distinction for its public appearance under the title (posthumously provided by Robbie) of *De Profundis*.

Such a passage as the following :

"If after I am free a friend of mine gave a feast, and did not invite me to it, I should not mind a bit. I can be perfectly happy by myself. With freedom, flowers, books, and the moon, who could not be perfectly happy? Besides, feasts are not for me any more. That side of life is over for me, v'ry fortunately, I daresay. But if after I am free a friend of mine had a sorrow and refused to allow me to share it, I should feel most bitterly. If he shut the doors of the house of mourning against me, I would come back again and again and beg to be admitted, so that I might share in what I was entitled to share in. If he thought me unworthy, unfit to weep with him, I should feel it as the most terrible mode in which disgrace could be inflicted on me. But that could not be. I have a right to share in sorrow, and he who can look at the loveliness of the world and share its sorrow, and realise something of the wonder of both, is in immediate contact with divine things, and has got as near to God's secret as any one can get . . ."

He was unaware as, in accordance with the regulations, he handed over to a warder the last page of his completed letter, that in doing so he parted with the last prose work he was to write. And considerable though his powers of invention were—especially when used to embellish this Epistle to Bosie—he never foresaw for his manuscript an adventure half so fantastic as the one which eventually befell it.

A few days before his release from prison Wilde was visited by three friends, one of whom was Charles Ricketts. The young artist waited in another room while Robbie Ross and More Adey went in first to discuss with the prisoner questions relating to his immediate future. Could he make up his mind where he wanted to stay? What clothes was he in need of? Nothing they could do for him would be too much trouble. But somewhat to their surprise he would come to no decision himself, and flatly refused to sanction any suggestions that were put to him. His mood of abasement seemed to have exhausted itself. He was ready now once more to assert his independence; or at any rate to make some show of doing so.

But to Ricketts, when he came into the room, Wilde appeared to be in splendid form, and delighted to see him. Ignoring the presence of two warders and an inspector standing against the wall, he gave a brave imitation of himself in former days. Though it was in no mood of gaiety that Ricketts remembered seeing him last, on that foggy afternoon in the Chelsea studio, so shortly before he had driven off to his club and found waiting for him there Queensberry's insulting card.

"Both my dear friends," he said to Ricketts, laughing, "wish me to retire to a monastery. . . . Or we se still, to some dim country place in England: I believe it was Twyford . . . They speak of Venice later with its silence and dead waterways. No, I have had enough of silence!"

Ricketts thought how improved in health Wilde looked;

his jowl less flabby, the fine eyes shining clearly. He tried, without making it too obvious, not to notice the hideous garments he had on; it hurt to see his friend made a mock of, stamped prominently with arrows.

"But, Oscar," he said, "is not Venice, with its beauty and stillness, the very place for work and privacy?"

Wilde said, with mild exasperation:

"Privacy! Work! My dear Ricketts, I wish to look at life, not to become a monument for tourists . . ."

"But have you not thought of a new play? I am sure you have."

"A play! The theatre!" He shrugged his broad shoulders. "My dear boy, what folly was mine. I held the future of the English stage in the hollow of my hand, to make or mar. To-day, in London, who would produce a work of mine?"

By way of encouragement, Ross said:

"There was a play about Pharaoh you always thought of writing."

The idea caught his fancy: "If I wrote that one," he said, "I would need to have books about Egypt, full of the names of beautiful things, rare and curious foods for the feast. . . ." He paused, then continued, reflectively, "At night, in the cold, when I felt hungry, I have often thought of fantastic feasts . . . Yes, I have sometimes felt cold and hungry. But many of my warders have been friends." He lowered his voice: "Don't mention this, it might lead to trouble: knowing I had not enough food, they brought me curious things to eat, Scotch scones, meat pies and sausage rolls—believing, I suppose, that a hungry man can eat anything. . . ."

The interview soon came to an end, and the three men as they made their way back to town could not help wondering how the world would seem to Oscar on his release, and how Oscar would seem to the world. That the two might come to terms with each other was a possibility at present too remote to be usefully contemplated.

Chapter Eighteen

THE little group of faithful friends, including Ada Levenson, gathered in the Rev. Stewart Headlam's study at 31, Upper Bedford Place, were not unnaturally a little apprehensive on the morning of May 19th, 1897. What painful change, they asked themselves, might not be evident in poor Oscar's appearance? Would the rigours of Hard Labour have affected his once gay temperament?

Their host was not with them at the moment, but would be back shortly. True to his promise he had gone with Robert Ross to meet their friend as he came from the prison.

To forestall the possibility of his being met at Reading by Queensberry's hirelings, the prisoner had the evening before been brought to London in charge of two warders, dressed in plain clothes like himself. He was lodged for the night in Pentonville.

"Robbie! Dear Stewart Headlam! How kind you both are. . . ."

Wilde stepped smiling through the small door in the huge prison gate; he looked far better in health than he had done before his withdrawal from the world, two years previously. Some of the fleshiness had disappeared, his skin was no longer blotchy, the fine eyes glowed brilliantly.

From the window of the cab as it rattled along the Euston Road it amused him to notice that placards, printed in anticipation of the event, announced in bold type: "Release of Oscar Wilde."

So the newspapers hadn't done with him yet? Unmentionable as his crime was supposed to be, they were seemingly reluctant to let it be forgotten. He understood that battles had been fought over him in the world's press almost

from the moment his sentence was pronounced. In France they said, "So this is how the English behave to their poets." But in America it was, "So this is how the English poets behave!"

At such an early hour—it was barely seven o'clock—he had not expected to meet any other of his friends. He was therefore overcome with delight on reaching the house to find that others were indeed there to welcome him.

"He entered the room," said Ada Leverson afterwards, "with the dignity of a king returning from exile."

"Sphinx!" was his greeting to her, as he advanced with arms outstretched, "how marvellous of you to know exactly the right hat to wear at seven o'clock in the morning to meet a friend who has been away! You can't have got up: you must have sat up."

At once he put them all at their ease; talking, laughing, smoking; sniffing the flower in his buttonhole. His wit flowed freely, nor did he purposely avoid the subject that he knew very well must be in their minds; embarrassing them, possibly, far more than it did him.

"But you have not asked me what sort of journey I had coming up to town last evening. I shall tell you all the same . . ."

He was telling again, with all his old flair, an anecdote in which he mixed truth with fiction, slightly ridiculing both:

"Do you know one of the punishments that happen to people who have been 'away'? They are not allowed to read the *Daily Chronicle*. Coming along I begged to be allowed to read it in the train. 'No!' Then I suggested that I might be allowed to read it upside down. This they consented to allow, and I read all the way the *Daily Chronicle* upside down, and never enjoyed it so much. It's really the only way to read newspapers."

Taking advantage of his apparently light mood to draw him out, someone asked:

"They were not too unkind to you, Oscar?"

From the change that came over him it was obvious that the question had been an unwise one.

"Unkind?" he repeated. "It was—dreadful."

"You must not think about it any more," Ross told him. "The future is what we have to consider now, not the past. That is all forgotten."

But for all his light-heartedness, through which now and then emotion appeared, he could not keep back (even for the sake of sparing others embarrassment) the thought of what unimaginable suffering he had endured.

"Forget?" he repeated, looking away, finding his voice difficult to control. "Even if I could forget what was done to me there, I could never forget the others . . ."

Suddenly he broke off, as if reminding himself that this was not a moment for seriousness. But encouraged by the silence that had fallen upon the group, he went on :

"During the first six months I was terribly unhappy—so utterly miserable that I wanted to kill myself. Yes, kill myself; but what prevented me from doing so was looking at the *others*, and seeing that they were as unhappy as I was, and feeling sorry for them."

A pause was followed by Headlam saying :

"You were allowed books to read, of course?"

"Yes, I have been reading. The last Governor I had, Major Nelson, was a charming man, and most considerate to me."

His eyes met Ada Leverson's; and recalling what a gay, as well as generous, creature she was, he dropped back once more into his easier manner:

"The dear Governor! Such a delightful man, and his wife is charming. I spent happy hours in their garden, and they asked me to spend the summer with them. Unusual, I think. But I don't feel I can. I feel I want a change of scene."

He went on to tell them how it was part of the Governor's job to inform prisoners when any of their relatives died, and that in mentioning to Wilde that one of his aunts had

died (Aunt Jane, no doubt) he had added, out of kindness, news of the art world that he thought might be appreciated:

"It may interest you to know, Wilde, that Mr. Poynter has been elected President of the Royal Academy."

Wilde laughed: "I told him how grateful I was to him for telling me about my poor Aunt, but said that perhaps he could have broken Poynter to me more gently."

The first coffee he had tasted for two years especially pleased Wilde, who drank it with relish. Nobody could help noticing how wonderfully fit he looked; it was perhaps what surprised them most about him. To anyone ignorant of the facts he might just have returned from taking a successful cure abroad.

Ada Leverson tactfully chose a moment when they could not to be overheard to ask him about Bosie. He replied:

"He is in Italy, I think. It seems we are not allowed to meet. His mother threatens to cut off his allowance if he tries to see me, and"—he lowered his voice—"my friends say they cannot help me if I go to him."

"But why must you be kept apart? I'm sure Bosie wants to see you as much as you want to see him."

"I'm sure, too." He made a little gesture of hopelessness, then added: "Perhaps certain people are inclined to be jealous. . . . We'll see each other again, though. It is only a question of time."

For a few minutes he left the room to write a letter to a Roman Catholic Retreat nearby, where he asked to be admitted for some months, until he had decided what he should do with his life. He sent the letter by messenger, and while awaiting a reply, rejoined his friends.

"For a while," he confided to them, "I am thinking of going into a retreat. To collect my thoughts. Yes, a Roman Catholic Retreat. I have written asking if they will receive me at once. I should like to remain there for at least six months."

This news caused general surprise.

"You are really going to shut yourself away?" one of his friends asked. "Bury yourself again—of your own free will? That doesn't sound like you, Oscar. You were always so fond of life."

He answered, with something of the theatrical flourish he had affected in the old days:

"You forgot—prison has completely changed me. My life is like a work of art. An artist never begins the same work twice, or else it shows that he has not succeeded. My life before prison was as successful as possible. Now all that is finished and done with."

"But you are going to write again?" someone said. "You *must* write a new play. In Paris!"

He waved the idea aside:

"I don't want to show myself until I have written a new play. So I must hide while I am writing it. The public is so foolish that it knows a man only by the last thing he has done. If I were to go to Paris now, people would see in me only the convict. Scandals, I used to think, lent charm, or at least interest, to a man. Now I know that they crush him."

Someone asked where Frank Harris was. His absence on such an occasion seemed incredible.

"When Frank came to see me in Reading last month," Wilde said, "he invited me to tour France in his company. That is something I have no intention whatever of doing. To be with him would be like a perpetual football match."

"But why is he not here to-day?"

"Perhaps," said Wilde, "he has gone to South Africa to make another fortune;" and he left it at that.

Had he cared to, he could have uttered a few caustic remarks at Harris's expense. He was not feeling too kindly disposed towards his friend. At Reading Harris had been full of twenty thousand pounds that he said he had won in South Africa, and of which he had asked Wilde to accept, as a gift, five hundred. But apparently changing his mind on the return journey, he had sent, through Wilde's friend,

More Adey, a message regretting that the gift could not after all be managed.

By the time a reply to Wilde's letter arrived, most of those who called to see him early that morning had departed. Which was fortunate, for the sight of him in tears was not a pleasing one. Uncontrolled sobs broke from him as he read what the Holy Fathers had to say: That before granting his request they would need to be assured that he had given the matter his deepest consideration, and had also received preliminary instruction for not less than a year.

"I thought," he cried, "my punishment was ended. It has just begun."

Nevertheless, by midday he had quite recovered from this emotional outburst. It was decided that he and Ross should leave for Dieppe immediately, calling first at Hatchards in Piccadilly to choose some books for their journey. But as he entered the shop Wilde was instantly recognised by a customer, and turning back continued in haste the drive to Victoria Station.

Had he known as he drove through the familiar London streets that he was leaving them behind him for ever, it must have occurred to him how much unnecessary suffering he could have avoided by starting this same journey two years sooner.

That night he and Ross put up at the Sandwich Hotel in Dieppe. Before retiring for the night he handed to his friend a thick wad of manuscript, reminding him that he already had instructions what to do with it. It was the Epistle to Bosie.

A month before his release Wilde had written:

"My Dear Robbie,—I send you a manuscript separate from this, which I wish you to have copied for me."

But in fact the manuscript had not arrived, never having been sent. According to the regulations, nothing written by a prisoner during his sentence, save his routine letters, was allowed to leave the prison. So that The Epistle might never have been heard of again, had not Major Nelson, on

his own responsibility, handed it to the author on the morning of his release.

Part of Wilde's instructions to Ross had been that he should send the letter to Bosie, but first have a copy typed for the benefit of posterity:

"I do not defend my conduct, I explain it. . . ."

Obviously he would have preferred his work to be beautifully copied by a monk, on parchment. But he did not altogether scorn the more modern method. Instead he observed that in his opinion the typewriter, when played with real expression, was scarcely more annoying than the piano when played by a sister, or near relation.

Chapter Nineteen:

"Vivent Monsieur Melmoth et la Reine d'Angleterre!" chorused the forty village children at the conclusion of the treat they had been given by the kind English gentleman, to celebrate Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee. They could not remember ever having had such a feast of strawberries and cream, cakes, biscuits, and sweets of every sort.

In Berneval-sur-Mer there was no more popular resident than Monsieur Melmoth, who had recently come from Dieppe to make his home there. He adored the place, he said. "The whole country is lovely, and full of forest and deep meadow." He had rented the Chalet Bourgeat, where he led the simple life that he decided should henceforward be his: rising at 7.30 in the morning, retiring at ten at night, and between whiles swimming in the sea and going for long, deliciously exhausting walks.

To those who knew the English gentleman for what he was— as opposed to the sinister figure he had become in the eyes of his fellow-countrymen— there was nothing surprising in the little celebration to which he had given himself so wholeheartedly. Queen Victoria had always been one of the three women for whom he had entertained the highest personal regard; the other two being Sarah Bernhardt and Lily Langtry. "I would have married any one of them with pleasure," he told a friend.

And he had always been fond of children. His own small sons he was not allowed to see; they had been spirited away by his wife's relatives, given the new name of Holland, and encouraged to forget that they still had a father alive. It occurred to nobody how good for that father it might have been to see his children once more, to be reunited with his family. In fact only a handful of loyal friends wished to

be associated with him at all; and many who had once loudly claimed his acquaintance for the sake of the reflected glory it shed upon them, now felt it wiser to ignore his existence.

The new name he chose for his new life—and, as he said, to spare the blushes of the postman—came to him as an inspiration. Sebastian Melmoth! It enchanted him almost as much as his own: the Christian name suggested the famous martyr, seen always in pictures pierced with arrows; the surname came from the title of a novel written by an uncle of his mother's, *Melmoth the Wanderer*. He began by enjoying tremendously the latest rôle he had invented for himself.

A fund for him to draw upon amounting to £800 had been subscribed by his friends. Robbie acted as the treasurer, and also paid him the regular allowance made him by his wife, under certain conditions; the principal condition being that he remained apart from Bosie. Very careful, too, Robbie had to be with the amounts he doled out, for his remittance man had never learned the art of economy. He found it impossible to resist the little extravagances he loved. Besides, he was absurdly generous.

Friends came to see him during these first three months at Berneval. Robert Sherard came, note-book in hand, wondering what the Master had to tell him of his experiences in prison.

"Now, Robert, don't be morbid," he was told.

Wilde wanted to forget the prison, if not the prisoners—to one or two of whom he instructed Robbie to send little notes, with small sums enclosed, addressed to *Poste Restante, Reading*. The notes were to be signed—"Yours sincerely, C.3.3."

But one thing he had learned in prison, he could not forget. It caused him whenever he saw an article slightly out of place, to move it back into position again. He said, as he did so:

"I had to keep everything in my cell in its exact place,

and if I neglected this even in the slightest, I was punished, and the punishment was so horrible to me that I often started up in my sleep to feel if each thing was where the regulations would have it, and not an inch either to the right or the left. And the terror haunts me still, and involuntarily my fingers make order where anything is disarranged."

When André Gide came to Berneval, he found Wilde changed in more ways than one. He was no longer the slightly frenzied man he had come across at the hotel in Algiers shortly before the crisis. This was the Wilde he had met first; four years ago it must have been: the dreamer with the amused smile and fascinating voice, lacking any hint of pomposity or arrogance. 'A darling man' his Irish compatriots could easily, and with truth, have called him. His appearance, however, was sadly changed. In his journal afterwards, Gide wrote:

"I noticed, now that the light was better, that the skin of his face had become red and common-looking, and his hands even more so, though they still bore the same rings - one to which he was especially attached had in a reversible bezel an Egyptian scarabaeus in lapis lazuli. His teeth were dreadfully decayed."

Reminding him of their last meeting, Gide asked his friend if he had not seen the danger awaiting him in England, and heedlessly rushed headlong into it.

"Oh, naturally," Wilde said, "I knew there would be a catastrophe, either that or something else; I was expecting it. . . . Just imagine - to go any further was impossible, and that state of things could not last. That is why there had to be some end to it, you see."

The thought occurred to Gide that Berneval was a deadly spot to live in, and that Wilde must surely soon tire of it and move on somewhere else. But in deference to the other's enthusiasm for the place - which appeared perfectly genuine, but could have resulted from an ardent desire to make the best of the circumstances - he said nothing.

"Did I not do well to come here?" Wilde asked. "Everyone is most good to me—the Curé especially. . . . I can never leave Berneval because only this morning the Curé offered me a perpetual seat in the choir-stalls."

Another reason he gave for wanting to remain permanently in the little village by the sea, was that the Custom-house men were so bored with nothing to do that they depended upon him for books to read. To start with he had given them the novels of the elder Dumas. And he went on, then, to say how much the children there adored him, and spoke of the treat he had given them on the day of the Queen's Jubilee.

"And what of Bosie?" asked Gide, who was not to know of the strictures imposed from without for preventing a resumption of that ill-starred friendship.

"We write to one another," Wilde said. "But he does not understand me. He thinks I should bear ill-will towards all those who caused my suffering. I tell him that I am grateful to them for teaching me the meaning of pity—which is the greatest and most beautiful thing in the world.

"Bosie and I cannot follow the same road. I tell him so in every letter. He has his—I have mine. His is that of Alcibiades; mine is now that of St. Francis of Assisi. Do you know St. Francis of Assisi? A wonderful man! Would you like to give me a great pleasure, André? Send me the best life of St. Francis you can find."

To substantiate his promise, so frequently given to friends, of starting a new literary career, the exile one morning, while walking by the seashore, commenced to write in his mind the story of the young guardsman they had hanged in Reading Gaol. He had a fancy for casting this in the same vein as *A Shropshire Lad*, an inscribed copy of which poem the author had recently sent him. The circumstances surrounding Trooper Wooldridge's crime of passion had from the first deeply moved him, and it was with every intention of creating a worthy tribute to the memory of the tragic young soldier, that he set to work.

Few sensations are more satisfying than the one an author experiences who has expressed himself precisely as he hoped to do; and elatedly Wilde set down, as the vision returned of his first encounter with Wooldridge, the effect it had had upon him.

I walked with other souls in pain,
Within another ring,
And was wondering if the man had done
A great or little thing,
When a voice behind me whispered low,
“*That fellow’s got to sing.*”

Dear Christ! the very prison walls
Suddenly seemed to reel,
And the sky above my head became
Like a casket of scorching steel;
And though I was a soul in pain,
My pain I could not feel.

Considerable progress with the poem was made during these first few months by the sea. Here were the ideal working conditions; the peace and quiet he had so longed for when the distractions offered by the gaiety of London Society had proved too much for him. And yet Berneval could be infernally dull. As the novelty he found in primitive living wore off, the role of St. Francis of Assisi held less and less attraction for him. With nobody to talk to, now that his various friends from England had returned after short visits to him, and his capital rapidly diminishing as a result of the hospitality he had extended to them, he began to wonder what he should do to save himself from falling into a state of perpetual melancholy.

In view of how good his friends had been to him—especially his dear Robbie, who had taken his affairs in hand and was doing his utmost to rehabilitate him—he refused at first to listen to the voice of the tempter: the words spoken by Bosie in his letters, asking if Oscar had forgotten what they had once been to each other, and suggesting that they should resume their friendship.

He replied that a meeting between them was impossible.

reminding Bosie that he owed everything to the friends who were being so good to him : "I would be wretched if I did anything that would separate them from me . . ."

But he felt wretched as it was. How could he be expected, he asked himself, to find inspiration for his work in solitude? He who had once been the Lord of Language and the King of Life. Gay companionship, the stimulation of an intellect equal to his own, someone to love—these were things he could not do without, if he really hoped to write a new play, or a book, that was worth anything at all.

In a desperate attempt to dispense the cloud of boredom that threatened to suffocate him if he did not instantly change his environment, he wrote to Constance. The suggestion he put to his wife, was that the arrangement by which they should not meet until a year had elapsed (in which he proved himself a reformed character) be cancelled. He wanted more than anything to see his children again. Would she not believe how sincere he was, and grant his request?

In a reply whose frigidity plainly showed it to have been written at the dictation of her solicitors, Constance merely reminded him of the only conditions under which a reunion was to be considered : one of them that he must never see Douglas again.

Incensed by this refusal—as possibly the solicitors had intended him to be—Wilde wrote at once to Bosie, arranging to meet him again. Rouen was the place chosen by the lovers for their meeting after being parted for so long. At sight of Bosie, who was at the station to meet him, tears came into Wilde's eyes. All the strife they had been through together, the quarrels, the recriminations, were forgotten in the joy of seeing one another again. At that moment Wilde willingly repudiated all the accusations he had brought against his young friend in the Epistle addressed to him. For once more the young friend's radiant looks, and smiling, rose-leaf lips, were having their magical effect. And if proof were needed of Bosie's devotion, surely it was to be found in

his refusal to so much as mention the Epistle? which could hardly not have wounded him when he read it.

All that day they walked about arm in arm; and after a night spent at the Hotel de la Poste, Wilde returned next morning to Berneval, and Douglas to Paris. But not before they had decided to set up house together the following month, in Naples.

Wilde's decision—one he was now determined upon—to resume his friendship with Bosie, came as a bitter blow to Robbie; who saw in it the ruin of his own well-intentioned schemes for keeping them apart. He reminded the Master in a letter of what the consequences of taking such a step would be; to which the Master replied that if he had to endure much longer the boredom of living by himself at Berneval, he would commit suicide.

If Robbie had been on the spot, his influence would have counted for something. But his job kept him in England. He could only express in letters his profound disapproval of what had come to pass. But this in time gave place to an acceptance of the situation, which he supposed to be inevitable. And he was not prevented by the unexpected turn of events from serving his friend as faithfully as he had always done.

So little changed was the life of the two exiles in Naples from what it had been in the many places they had stayed in together in England, that only the background seemed new. Some work was done, certainly; Wilde finished *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, as he now called the poem he had started at Berneval; Douglas occupied himself with the composition of sonnets. It seemed their life at the Villa Guidice was harmless enough. But lacking the ferocious interference of the Scarlet Marquess—who, if he knew of the reunion, was not bothering himself about it—they had still to endure the leering disapproval of the scandal-mongers, whose indignant tongues wagged far and wide in an effort to stir up trouble.

The loathing felt for him by so many, never seriously upset Wilde. Apart from his forgiving nature, he was wise enough always to see the other's point of view.

"The world, Bosie," he said, "is furious because it sees that the punishment it inflicted upon me has been quite without effect. It would like to be able to say: 'By putting Oscar Wilde in prison we put an end to his association with Alfred Douglas, and all that it stood for.' Unhappily for the world this is not so. Which makes the world very angry indeed. It has been made to realise, you see, that its barbarous treatment of me has had no influence whatever."

A representative of the world called one day at the Villa Guidice. An Attaché from the British Embassy at Rome, he had come to Naples on the Ambassador's orders, to point out to Douglas the inadvisability of befriending an ex-convict—who should instantly be sent about his business.

"The fact of this fellow being a guest in your house is causing no end of gossip and scandal," said the little Attaché; who made no attempt to disguise his own disapproval of the situation.

"I pay no attention to gossip," Douglas told him.

"Perhaps it would be better if you did," said the other.

The argument became heated.

"I have asked my friend to stay with me because he has nowhere else to go and is practically without means. It is unthinkable that I should turn him out of my house, simply on account of evil-minded people who choose to concern themselves with what is no affair of theirs."

The Attaché reminded Douglas that when in Rome the previous year with his mother, he had been shown every kindness and consideration by the Embassy. Was he being fair to the Embassy now, causing all this gossip?

"I shall do as I see fit," said Douglas.

Before departing, the little Attaché, much annoyed at not having successfully accomplished his mission, informed Douglas that he was nothing but a 'quixotic fool', and warned him that he would live to regret having befriended

a 'beast like Wilde', who would get everything he could out of him, and then turn round and abuse him.

This prophecy proved to some extent to be true. Though Wilde's behaviour, if totally unjustified by normal standards, was partly to be excused on the grounds of extreme provocation.

Before many months had passed a separation was forced upon the two friends. Douglas's mother refused to allow him a penny so long as he remained in Wilde's company. Wilde's wife, through her solicitors, informed him that his allowance would cease unless he left Douglas.

But effective as these threatened actions were in breaking up the friendship, it might not in any case for long have survived the tension which frequently existed between the lovers; who, as they had always done, quarrelled with the unreasonableness of two fractious adolescents.

Prior to his arrival in Naples—when the memory was still sweet of their happy hours together in Rouen—Wilde had written to Douglas that although it had not been so in the old days, now he felt convinced that his only hope of again doing beautiful work in art was being with his friend.

So unsatisfactory, however, had their relationship become during the latter part of the time spent at the Villa Guidice, that, as he left Naples, Wilde wrote to tell Robbie what a failure his visit to Bosie had been. He had, he said, accepted the offer of a home, only to find when he arrived that Bosie had no money to speak of, and expected him to pay all the expenses. It was, he went on to say, the most bitter experience in his life. He never wanted to see Bosie again: "He fills me with horror."

Nothing in the letter was quite true, of course. But having, against Robbie's advice, joined forces with Douglas again, what else could he do, when their parting became inevitable, but excuse it as best he could? He made no mention in the letter of the two hundred pounds sent him by the Marchioness of Queensberry when he left Naples. Nor did he

make any reference, in recording the details of his intention to live permanently in Paris, of the fact that Douglas was also to be domiciled in that city.

Indeed from now onwards untrustworthiness—especially with regard to the sums of money he received from his friends, and the manner in which he spent them—was to become a characteristic of his.

For his behaviour after his fall from grace he was severely judged by those who had managed not to fall themselves. From their secure position these critics overlooked an important, if unfortunate, fact: that without the conditions his genius demanded for its sustenance, he had little else but his wits to live by. The stimulus of applause was something without which his creative impulse refused to stir itself. And not only was he no longer applauded. He was vilified.

Chapter Twenty

THIS is rather delightful, thought Wilde, sitting outside the Café de la Paix in the warm spring sunshine; sipping a pre-luncheon *aperitif*. As delightful, that is, as anything can be in a life from which any particular reason for wanting to go on living at all, has so long been absent. And how even more delighted I shall feel if someone quite by chance turns up and offers me a free meal!

Now that Bosie had given up his flat in the fashionable Avenue Kléber and returned to England, he would miss his companionship, to say nothing of the hospitality he had enjoyed on most days of the week. Well-cooked meals and plenty of champagne to go with them, were luxuries he himself could no longer afford. Not that he was inclined to economise in that direction. Which was why he got into such hot water with dear Robbie, who constantly wrote to scold him for his alleged extravagance.

Extravagance! Surely after what he had been made to swallow in prison—the weak gruel, badly cooked bread, suet and water; which diet, as he had pointed out in a letter to the *Daily Chronicle*, resulted in such incessant diarrhoea that the warders had to circulate daily with astringent medicine—he deserved now to eat at appetising restaurants?

He recalled a saying to the effect that if you sat long enough outside the Café de la Paix, someone you knew was sure to turn up. In his case, however, it was not always safe to assume that the someone you knew, still wanted to know you. He had soon learned how unwelcome his presence often was to English and American visitors who knew him only by sight. They moved as far away from him as if a bad smell had suddenly invaded their nostrils, making no attempt to disguise their feelings in order to spare his own.

To smug Britannia, whose breast-plate concealed a bosom devoid of compassion, Paris seemed an eminently suitable place for Wilde to end his days in. Any suggestion that since he had paid the penalty for his sins they should be forgiven him, she would not countenance. A man might sin to his heart's content for all she cared. But what he must on no account do, was to be found out. Carelessness of that sort she found quite inexcusable, and anyone indulging in it must be prepared to put up with the consequences; which included perpetual banishment from the society of those persons who had the good sense to hide their pet vice under a cover of respectability.

In eighteen months Wilde's friends—with the exception of Robbie—had wearied a little of their precious martyr; in whom they no longer saw the disparaged genius about to rise from the pit into which he had been flung. Instead he began to appear to them as a man who, drowning his sorrow in absinthe, was reduced by his disinclination for work to cadge what money he could in order to supplement the meagre remittance upon which he subsisted. Indeed to some of them, now that the novelty of his exile had worn off, Wilde had become something of a nuisance.

It would have been an exaggeration to say of him that he drank to excess. Nevertheless, he seldom ended the day in a perfectly sober state, and had he been able to afford more to drink, would never have done so. Referring afterwards to this period, it pleased those of his friends who 'wrote him up' after his death (and few of them resisted the temptation) to present him as a somewhat bedraggled figure, prowling along the Boulevards in a state of abject poverty, muttering to himself. But such was very far from being the case, since he managed somehow always to preserve a smart and dignified appearance.

If he drank more than was good for him, he was the first to be aware of the fact, and invariably apologised to his companions. Nor had his conversation lost its brilliance, or the power to enchant his listeners. His trouble nowadays

was to find an audience. But when he did, those who heard him were as richly rewarded as the guests at great houses had once been—long ago, when he had been acclaimed a Lord of Language.

What so delighted him this morning, filling him with an unusual sense of happiness, was a letter he had received from England; to which, in his head, he was now composing the answer. In order to refresh his memory as to its exact wording, he was about to take the letter once more from the inside pocket of his frock-coat, when his attention was caught by the familiar face of a passer-by.

His eyes met Gide's, who smiled; but Wilde had a feeling that the other would sooner not have seen him; that he paused merely out of politeness.

It was true. But not to offend his friend, of whom he had seen nothing since his visit to Berneval, Gide sat down at his table. He took care, however, to sit opposite to him, his back turned to the street, lest recognising him, passers-by should criticise the company he kept. This unworthy manoeuvre was not lost upon Wilde.

"Oh, sit here, near me, André," he said, indicating a chair at his side. "I am so much alone just now."

Shamefacedly, the colour rising to his cheeks, Gide obeyed.

Shaking his head, Wilde observed :

"When I used to meet Verlaine in the days gone by, I was never ashamed of being seen with him. I was rich, light-hearted, and covered with glory, but I felt that to be seen with him was an honour, even when Verlaine was drunk."

For a while they talked uneasily, Wilde relapsing suddenly into a mood of depression; saying how utterly impossible it was for him to write a line, that a new work from his pen was the last thing to be expected. The urge to write had left him. It was unlikely ever to return.

Gently, the other reminded him of the promise he had made his friends when he came out of prison, not to show

himself in Paris until he had published a new book, or produced a new play.

"Perhaps, Oscar, you should not have left Berneval so soon. Don't think that I am angry with you. Of course I am not. But it does occur to me that had you . . ."

Wilde interrupted him, saying, sorrowfully:

"You must not be angry, André, with one who has been *crushed*."

Left alone—as he frequently was nowadays directly his friends and acquaintances could decently make their escape—Wilde fell to thinking how hurt he would have been, even a few months ago, by Gide's foolish behaviour, as he chose to regard it.

Slow at first to believe that those whom he had once called his friends preferred not to be seen with him in public, he had now come to accept their attitude. It bewildered him, though, for the reason that the motive which prompted it was entirely alien to any that he himself could possibly have entertained in relation to another.

That he did accept their attitude, with a somewhat grim smile and a shrug of the shoulders, might mean that he had become cynical. He could not quite persuade himself that this was so; nor, to tell the truth, did he greatly care. But pressed for an opinion on what, with regard to human nature in general, he had principally discovered as the result of his downfall, he would unhesitatingly have mentioned man's inhumanity to man. Also he would have felt bound to admit that if many of his friends and acquaintances were not exactly inhuman, they nevertheless lacked to a surprising extent any real understanding of his situation; of the fearful mental strain from which he continually suffered.

How absurd of Gide to imagine that he could just sit down, take up his pen—and throw off an essay, or a comedy, as easily as he had done in the days before the world had turned against him. He had thought more of Gide, who seemed to be really no better than Frank Harris, or Robert

Sherard, for that matter. He had had occasion to speak quite sharply to Sherard.

They had met by chance on the Boulevards the other evening, and had talked sentimentally of their lasting friendship. Suddenly Sherard had taken it upon himself to abuse Wilde's friends, pointing out what a morally worthless lot they were, and insisting that he should rid himself of them and endeavour to reform his conduct before he became lost to all sense of shame. An argument had arisen that, owing to the amount each had had to drink, developed into an ugliness to which neither of them would normally have subscribed.

"I'm afraid you think only of your own pleasure," Wilde had said.

"I suppose," the other had replied angrily, "you consider it was a pleasure for me to make those dreadful journeys to Wandsworth and to Reading to see you?"

"My God, Robert, do you think it was a pleasure for me to be in those places?"

After which Sherard had been silent.

As for Frank Harris. . . . Wilde could no longer think of him without experiencing a feeling of intense irritation. Undoubtedly Harris had been kind to him after his fashion. But then it was not a fashion exactly calculated to endear one to the man. With a shudder, having ordered himself another *aperitif*, Wilde recalled the trip he had made not so long ago to La Napoule, as Harris's guest.

At the end of his stay there Wilde had seriously asked himself if what he had had to endure in Harris's company had really made his escape from a freezing Paris to the warm sunshine of the South, worth while. Interminably, Harris had talked of an hotel he had bought, and of a book he was writing on the life of Shakespeare. And he had taken good care to remind his guest upon every conceivable occasion that he was expected to pull himself together:

"Am I to understand that you have written absolutely

nothing, Oscar?" he would say : not once, but several times each day.

"Oh, Frank, it is impossible. No man who has suffered as I have done can be expected to recover the talent he once had for making pretty phrases. It is harder than you think."

"Rubbish, it should come easily to you. All you have to do, Oscar, is to make your punishment a rung of the ladder on which to climb to new heights of achievement. Why not another play—a play to rival the success of *The Importance of Being Earnest*?"

Indeed, why not? Wilde had given up asking himself the question. He knew the answer too well. It was a simple answer, too, yet none of those to whom he gave it seemed capable of taking it in. For what none of them realised, was that he would never in his life have been able to write a line, had he not had the picture in his mind as he wrote of an enchanted reader absorbed in his prose, or a vast audience enthusiastically applauding his dialogue as the actors spoke it. And what was left of his reading public now? Where in England was there a theatre that would dare to put on a play of his? He had learned from the difficulties encountered over the publication of *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, whose sales had greatly disappointed him, in what disrepute his name was still held.

An incident at La Napoule, that still bewildered and pained him whenever he happened to think of it, had occurred as he was strolling by himself along a deserted country road skirting the sea. A man had come towards him on a bicycle whom he had instantly recognised as George Alexander. But the actor did not stop to greet the author whose last play he had triumphantly appeared in on that memorable first-night at the St. James's Theatre. Instead he had continued on his way.

Perhaps, though, it was Constance's death which had most strongly influenced his 'new life', as he called it; which had turned him from an endeavour to conquer his despair, and resulted in his allowing himself to be swept along by the

tide of his inclinations. On the night of April 7th, 1898, his wife had appeared to him in a dream, only to be told by him repeatedly to "go away, go away, and leave me in peace". The following day news had reached him by telegram of her death in Genoa.

With Constance's death, as he very well knew, went his last chance of ever seeing again the two little boys he had loved to play with and tell stories to in the nursery; the small sons he was forbidden to communicate with, lest in doing so he should upset the plans their guardians had made, by which it was hoped that they might in time forget ever having borne their father's dishonoured name.

To banish these sad thoughts he ordered himself another *aperitif* and took from his pocket the letter he had been about to read when Gide appeared. It was one of several letters he had received during the past few months from a youthful admirer, Louis Wilkinson; a boy of sixteen still at school, who had written to him as a complete stranger, to say how greatly he admired his work. In fact it was the first letter of appreciation he had received after coming out of prison.

"I read your 'Ballad of Reading Gaol' early in the present year," the boy had written, "and have never been so deeply affected by any other work, prose or verse, before . . . I cannot help but think very deeply of your unjust fate as I pass Reading on my way back to school here at Radley, and I trust you will not be insulted by my earnest sympathy as well as deepest gratitude."

This letter Wilde did not answer. To the one that followed it, however, he had felt obliged to reply, since it asked his permission—on behalf of the Ipswich Dramatic Society—to perform a dramatised version of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The project came to nothing, which was not surprising, the Ipswich Dramatic Society being merely an invention of Master Louis Wilkinson's, who hoped through it to induce his hero to answer his letters. Nor was he disappointed; and thereafter an exchange of correspondence took

place which afforded the hero as much pleasure as it did the hero-worshipper.

The letter occupying Wilde's attention at the moment had enclosed with it photographs of the writer, at which he stared musingly for some seconds. Then, having got from the waiter pen, paper and ink, he wrote to the boy.

He told him how fascinated he was by the photographs, not only because they enabled him to form in his mind a picture of the writer, but also because they so strangely resembled what he himself had looked like in his Oxford days. Several friends to whom he had shown the photographs had believed that they must be of the young Oscar, so remarkably alike were the features. But, he told the boy, *he* must not trail 'purple palls of tragedy', or allow himself to be overtaken by an evil Fate.

Wilde paused before continuing, to look up from the paper and stare at the busy, colourful Parisian scene about him. But his gaze seemed to go far beyond his immediate surroundings.

He saw perhaps in the mirror of the past a reflection of one who in the springtime of his manhood wandered care-free through the thorn-white meadow at Magdalen. A graceful youth looking back at him through the years, blissfully unaware of the scandal that was to change him, before the eyes of men, from a King of Life into a pariah treading wearily the pavements of a foreign city.

Chapter Twenty-one

WAITING at the Grand Café on the Boulevard des Capucines, for a dinner appointment, Douglas hit upon a little plan, the execution of which he hoped would prove as beneficial to himself as to his guest. Recent experience had taught him that Wilde could not be expected to arrive without appearing to be in the depths of depression; a state he made no effort to disguise, but in fact went out of his way to emphasise. The dejected expression he wore was an announcement in itself, saying in effect :

“Behold how we are harassed and reduced, and in what pain of mind we exist.”

It was hard work these days to coax him into a mood in which he bore even a slight resemblance to his former gay self, and when the time came to part, Douglas had discovered, it was always best, unless one was prepared to listen to an endless saga relating to the bill he owed at his hotel and the likelihood of his being turned into the street, to push across to him five or six hundred francs. These Wilde accepted ‘always with a sigh of relief, which now gave Douglas the idea of making his gift at the commencement, instead of at the end, of the meal; in order perhaps to put at rest his friend’s anxiety, and thereby ensure a more cheerful occasion for them both.

With his father’s death at the beginning of the year, Douglas had inherited a considerable amount of money. That the first payment he made out of this had been a cheque sent to Wilde for one hundred pounds, would have exasperated Queensberry; who on his deathbed had characteristically spat in his heir’s face prior to drawing his last breath. Other cheques had followed, and whenever the two friends met—which they often did during the summer of

1900, when Douglas came over from Chantilly, where he had set up a racing stable—Wilde was generously treated by him. Really there was no need for the exile to remain always in such straitened circumstances. Anyone in his position, had he chosen to, could have lived comfortably. But money went through Wilde's hands like water. He could without difficulty spend fifty pounds in a week, and at the end of that time wonder what had become of it, forgetting how recklessly he had entertained, while the money lasted, not only himself, but also the crowd of *boulevardiers* that he gathered round him in the evenings for company.

His brief periods of affluence were derived from advance payments made to him by one or two theatrical managers for plays he was always about to write, but of which not a line ever got written. It was the most graceful way the managers could find of relieving his impecuniosity without hurting his feelings. But once their number had exhausted itself, Wilde had to resort to fresh means of inducing others to provide for him, and as these became increasingly ineffectual he allowed himself mentally and physically to deteriorate.

As Douglas had foreseen, the effect upon his friend of a gift made immediately he arrived, was magical. His look of aggrieved sadness vanished behind a smile that was a little pathetic, inasmuch as it seemed to express an awareness of what was in the other's mind as he held out the roll of notes.

"Your winnings, Oscar," said Douglas.

"My winnings?"

"I put some money on a horse for you this afternoon. It won."

"How kind of you, Bosie dear," said Wilde, folding the notes away. "Not that I really approve of horse-racing—or indeed any sport involving the use of dumb animals." His brow contracted slightly: "You remember," he said, "how I used to describe fox-hunting: 'The unspeakable in pursuit of the uneatable.' How witty I once was, Bosie."

"And still are, Oscar, when you forget to be tragic."

"Perhaps, dear boy, you are right. Only the other day, when someone accused me of extravagance, I told them that I feared I was dying beyond my means."

Douglas laughed, before saying :

"But you mustn't talk of dying, Oscar."

"Why shouldn't I? I doubt very much if I shall live to see the new century." With a half smile he added : "If another century began and I was still alive, it would really be more than the English could stand."

"You will write again, Oscar. . . . Of course you will."

"Really, Bosie, you are becoming as tiresome as Frank Harris. Every time I see him he urges me to write."

"Can you blame him?"

With a certain deliberation, as if he wished to avoid being misunderstood, Wilde said:

"I met the other day the Countesse de Brémont, who asked me why I no longer wrote. I replied that I wrote when I did not know life, but now that I did know the meaning of life, I had no more to write. Life cannot be written; life can only be lived. I have lived."

But it turned out to be a convivial evening. For the greater part of the time, under the stimulus of an excellent brandy, the poet sang for his supper as blithely as he had once been accustomed to do in England, at tables presided over by hostesses of renown who considered themselves lucky to have secured his presence. There were moments, even, when something he said with a flash of his old spontaneous wit so reminded Douglas of the past, that he might have been sitting beside his friend at the Savoy, proud to be seen in his company by all the other diners in that vast, crowded room.

How sadly altered was the situation now, when it took courage to be seen about with the disgraced man, who was sure to be recognised wherever he went. Douglas had seen men leave cafés when Wilde came in; had heard lulls in the conversation and lewd remarks passed when they

visited restaurants together. At some of the places they frequented he thought Wilde might have been turned away had he not been with him. But no *maitre d'hôtel* quite likes to turn away an English Lord.

When the hour struck at which Douglas had to make his way home, and he called for the bill, Wilde's face fell. It was as if he had suddenly remembered that tears came more naturally to him than smiles. And watching, lugubriously, his friend counting the change the waiter had given him, he said, in a voice between a whimper and an apology:

"I hate to impose on you, Bosie, after you have given me this wonderful evening. But really I must ask you for a thousand francs. I simply dare not return to my hotel unless I have with me money to pay at least a part of the bill. I don't mind telling you that I am without a penny in the world, and if I do not go to the hotel tonight I shall be homeless."

"But, my dear Oscar," said Douglas, "I gave you a thousand francs not three hours ago, which you put into your pocket."

Wilde looked at him in astonishment. And as the truth of the situation dawned upon him, gave way to a burst of laughter, interrupted by a fit of coughing.

When the two friends, whose strange relationship had so violently disturbed the society of which they had once been such bright ornaments, took leave of one another on the Boulevard des Capucines that evening, they had said good-bye for the last time.

Walking slowly through the gardens of the Louvre towards his humble hotel in the Rue des Beaux Arts (whose proprietor, M. Dupoirier, out of the kindness of his heart endlessly extended him credit), Wilde felt magnificently uplifted. He owed not a little of this feeling of well-being to the amount of champagne he had had to drink, and to several glasses of an 1800 brandy which had originally been laid down at the Tuileries. But also he drew immense

elation from the thought that the day after tomorrow he would meet for the first time his friend Louis Wilkinson.

Learning that the young man was in Dieppe, he had written to him: ". . . do come to Paris. I am ill and unhappy—the touch of your hand might heal me . . ." If Louis, he thought now, as he moved down a narrow dark street and turned suddenly in at the door of a café across whose lighted window a pink net curtain was tightly drawn; if Louis is anything like his photographs, or talks as charmingly as he writes, his youthful companionship will be more than welcome. To keep always in touch with the younger generation is to ensure oneself against the onslaught of old age.

The café in which, on the spur of the moment, he had decided to have a final drink before going to bed, was one where he could always be sure of a cordial reception. Here the artists, the budding poets, and the little ballet dancers, treated him as The Master—an attention he had never made a pretence of disliking. Also these sympathetic spirits were pleased to pay for his drinks, in exchange for the privilege of listening to him. They had never heard, nor were they ever likely to hear in the whole course of their lives, a lovelier voice, more persuasively employed.

For hours he remained seated in the midst of his adoring audience; a plump man with a sallow complexion now made a little blotchy by the excitement of the evening; a man with purple shadows beneath his fine dark eyes, into which tears nowadays came sometimes too quickly for him to hide them.

He was about to leave, when they begged him for one more story. Until now he had amused them with anecdotes of people he had met, recounted experiences that afforded him an opportunity of lightly tossing compact philosophies into the smoke-laden air. But in response to the warmth of their appreciation, he decided to honour the occasion with one of his more elaborate tales; the 'poems in prose' as he

liked to call them, that his caressing and impressive voice relieved of the artificial quality they might otherwise have had. Out of the hush that fell upon the room in answer to his look of sudden concentration, the air of expectancy he engendered, his words sounded as if he were choosing them for the first time, to clothe a story that he made up as he went along.

"When Jesus returned to Nazareth," he said, his eyes gazing into space, "Nazareth was so changed that He no longer recognised His own city.

"The Nazareth where He had lived was full of lamentations and tears; this city was filled with outbursts of laughter and song. . . .

"In the street He saw a woman whose face and raiment were painted and whose feet were shod with pearls, and behind her came slowly, as a hunter, a young man who wore a cloak of two colours. The face of the woman was the face of an idol, and the eyes of the young man were bright with lust. And Jesus followed swiftly, and touched the hand of the young man, and said to him: 'Why do you look at this woman in such-wise?' and the young man turned round, and recognised Him, and said: 'But I was blind once and you gave me my sight. At what else should I look?'

"And Jesus ran forward and touched the painted raiment of the woman, and said to her: 'Is there no other way in which to walk save the way of sin?' And the woman turned round and recognised Him, and laughed, and said: 'But you forgave me my sins, and the way is a pleasant way.'

"When Jesus had passed out of the city, He saw, seated by the roadside, a young man who was weeping. He went towards him, touched the long locks of his hair, and said to him: 'Why are you weeping?' The young man looked up, recognised Him, and made answer: 'But I was dead once, and you raised me from the dead. What else should I do but weep?'

An awe-struck silence followed the end of the recitation.

Wilde sat quite still, staring tipsily before him. Presently he made an effort to rise from his chair, but finding the effort too much for him, promptly sat down again.

With a smile that was half amused, half apologetic, he said, addressing himself to no one in particular:

"I perceive that I am drunk! I find that alcohol, taken persistently, and in sufficiently large quantities, produces all the effects of intoxication!"

Once more he tried to get to his feet, only to fall back again in the chair. Then, almost defiantly, as if he considered his behaviour to be perfectly justified, he said:

"I have had my hand on the moon. Why should I try to rise a little from the ground?"

He remained a while after the others had left; not wanting, in spite of their offers, to give any of his disciples the trouble of seeing him home. He watched a waiter piling the chairs on the tables, then sprinkling the dusty floor from a carafe of water.

"What beautiful flowers you are watering," he said, quite seriously: "tulips, lilies, and roses. . ."

Used to humouring his customer, the waiter nodded his bald head in agreement.

"Yes, monsieur, beautiful flowers . . ."

From the imaginary garden, Wilde turned his attention to a glass in front of him:

"Absinthe," he said, reflectively, "Absinthe . . . It helps you to see things as you wish they were. Then you see them as they are not. Finally, you see them as they really are. And that is the most terrible thing in the world."

In the small bedroom of his hotel, he sat on the bed that was not quite long enough to ensure his comfort, and for a few seconds closed his eyes. Opening them, he saw on the face of the marble clock supported by a crouching lion, that it was three o'clock in the morning. He dragged himself up off the bed and stood, swaying slightly, to look at his reflection in the hideously framed mirror over the mantelpiece.

The face that looked back at him, prematurely wrinkled beneath a mass of tousled dark hair streaked with grey, was not inviting. He knew, of course, that when some care had been taken with it—an astringent applied after a close shave, and a little powder added—it would look not quite so unpleasant. At the same time he felt it a grave error of judgment to allow himself to be seen in person by the young man who had made an idol of him, writing him such delightful letters. He must remember when he went out later to send a telegram to Louis Wilkinson, putting him off. This would save his young correspondent a sad disillusionment, and himself the embarrassment of appearing before youth's critical gaze.

It was a pity, he felt. But it could not be helped. Soon he would be dead, anyway.

For some weeks before his death on November 13th, Wilde's ill health caused anxiety to his friends Robbie Ross and Reginald Turner; both of whom came to Paris to be near him. Early in October the ear he had injured by falling in chapel that morning in Wandsworth Prison, and which had hurt him on and off ever since, was operated on. But the pain remained. One minute he would be suffering aloud, the next laughing: it was impossible for anyone to tell from his manner how ill he really was.

Dupoirier, devoted by this time to the luckless Englishman, not only refrained from presenting him with the bill he owed for his stay at the Hotel d'Alsace, but even provided him with free meals; occasionally including a bottle of champagne. Drinking this, Wilde said:

"I am dying, as I have lived, beyond my means"; and added that he must not outlive the century, since already he was responsible for the failure of the Paris Exhibition. Seeing him there, walking around so contented and well-dressed, was too much for the English tourists, who instantly left. It made the French hate him, he said.

None of the doctors who visited him could correctly

diagnose his complaint, which turned out afterwards to have been cerebral meningitis with complications. As the end drew near, and it became increasingly difficult to keep the patient from his recent addiction to absinthe, he said to Reginald Turner one morning:

"I have had a dreadful dream, Reggie. I dreamt that I was dining with the dead."

"My dear Oscar," his friend replied, "I am sure you were the life and soul of the party."

Douglas happened to be shooting in Scotland when he received from Ross the telegram that took him speedily to Paris and to the Hotel d'Alsace, where he arrived too late to find his friend still alive. Learning that Wilde was penniless, he paid for the funeral; at which he, Ross, and Turner were the only English mourners. Good, generous M. Dupoirier was also present, and laid upon the grave a wreath of beaded flowers, inscribed: "A Mon Locataire."

Buried at Bagneux on December 3rd, 1900, Wilde's body was exhumed in 1909 to accommodate its removal to the more illustrious cemetery at Père Lachaise. By that time, however, his immortality was well on the way to being established.

In fact Oscar Wilde was born again the moment he died, to live on in the minds of men as the author of one surpassingly witty comedy, and to become the unofficial patron saint of all gentlemen biologically attracted to each other.

Epilogue

AND what became of the other actors in the story?

Lord Alfred Douglas lived to the age of seventy-five, dying in 1945. Though a poet of some distinction, it was as a persistent litigant that he chiefly attracted public attention. Throughout a series of lawsuits he exhibited in all its irresponsibility and violence that temperament whose constant display had so greatly distressed Wilde. His impetuous outbursts were even less acceptable in a grown man than they had been in a spoiled youth. Several of the libel actions he brought into court grew out of what was said by others of his notorious friendship with the unfortunate dramatist. But it was through losing an action for libel brought against him by Mr. Winston Churchill that he was finally sentenced to six months imprisonment. The following morning *The Times* marked the event with a leading article:

"There will be general agreement with the verdict of the jury who tried the case against Lord Alfred Douglas. To those who have watched the career of the man, six months imprisonment will be regarded as a moderate sentence. For years, in newspapers and circulars and in pamphlets, he has conducted a campaign of irresponsible calumny regardless of facts and intrepid in defamatory invective. At last he has been laid by the heels in quite a gentle way, but in a way which we hope—not with great confidence—will teach him a lesson."

Robbie Ross, until he was found dead from a heart attack in his rooms in Half Moon Street in 1918, religiously edited new editions of his friend Wilde's works. His greatest enemy proved to be Douglas, his rival for Wilde's affection from earliest days. Almost as relentlessly as Queensberry had pursued Wilde, so Douglas eventually pursued Ross. He

alleged that he had never received from him a copy of the 'Epistle to Bosie' written by Wilde in prison. Whether or not this was so, has never to this day been made quite clear. Certain facts, however, regarding that remarkably long letter—which in its original form plainly stated Douglas to have been the ruin of Wilde's life—have since become history.

In 1905 there was published a posthumous work of Wilde's entitled *De Profundis*, in the preface to which Ross wrote:

"The book requires little introduction and scarcely any explanation. I have only to record that it was written by my friend during the last months of his imprisonment, that it was the only work he wrote while in prison, and the last work in prose he ever wrote."

Had he wished to be entirely truthful, Ross might have explained that the book consisted only of extracts taken from a letter written to Douglas, from which all references to Douglas had been purposely removed. Learning of this deception, and wishing to possess the original letter, Douglas waged a personal vendetta against Ross, whom he accused—not unjustly—of indulging in the same practices which had brought about Wilde's downfall. Ross, however, with the loyal help of influential friends, survived this scandal. And the zeal with which he conducted Wilde's affairs to the advantage of his two sons, was a measure of the genuine affection he had always felt for their father.

Few had a good word to say for Frank Harris when he died in 1931. But his good opinion of himself never deserted him. "I have," he said, "made pictures of my contemporaries painted with such loving sympathy and boldness that henceforth all men will see them as I see them."

Not content with an investigation of his contemporaries, Harris got to know the man Shakespeare through his works, and of the book he wrote as a result, said: "I have also brought Shakespeare to life after he had been three centuries in the grave."

What, apparently, Harris failed to do, though, was to

bring to life for those who had known him—Bernard Shaw excepted—his friend Oscar Wilde.

The book he wrote about him in 1910 was violently denounced by Robert Sherard, the first of whose own books on the same subject was published in 1906.

Nor did André Gide escape being called an unmitigated liar by Sherard, who indignantly refused to credit his account of their experience together in Algiers. Growing out of the sensitivity which had caused him always to feel slightly embarrassed in Wilde's company, Gide lived to achieve the status of a 'grand old man' of French Literature. And so intensely interested did he become in the spectacle of his own homosexual tendencies, that he made it the subject of much that he wrote.

Standing before the mighty crag of stone wrought by Epstein for Wilde's tomb in Père Lachaise, Graham Robertson, who had known the dead man, had to laugh.

"The most ephemeral of triflers," he said, gazing at the enormous Sphinx, "weighed down by all the gigantic symbols of eternity, the mouse crushed beneath its mother the mountain.

"The actual Oscar Wilde," he went on to observe, "is no longer remembered. Stirred by the hopeless tragedy of his end, imagination has worked backwards from it, fashioning a being fit for so sombre a fate."

But none can be certain that Wilde would have agreed with him. On the whole he might not have been displeased with a tombstone whose symbol was a figure 'at once Deity and Monster'. His performance on earth had, after all, tended somewhat to encourage precisely that illusion.

